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# Women as Agents of Salvation in the Old Testament: An Appraisal of Hannah and Abigail in Israel's Early Monarchy (1 Samuel 1-3, 25)

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WOMEN AS AGENTS OF SALVATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: AN  
APPRAISAL OF HANNAH AND ABIGAIL IN ISRAEL'S EARLY MONARCHY  
(1 SAMUEL 1-3, 25)

By

Lazarus Ejike Onuh

Director: Dr. Patrick Reid

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Biblical Studies

At Providence College

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## **List of Abbreviations**

1 Cor	<i>1 Corinthians</i>
1 Sam	<i>1 Samuel</i>
2 Sam	<i>2 Samuel</i>
Esth	<i>Esther</i>
ESV	<i>English Standard Version</i>
Ex	<i>Exodus</i>
Gen	<i>Genesis</i>
Josh	<i>Joshua</i>
Judg	<i>Judges</i>
NABRE	<i>New American Bible Revised Edition</i>
Num	<i>Numbers</i>
Ps	<i>Psalms</i>
ST	<i>Summa Theologica</i>



## Introduction

The Old Testament is replete with women who were agents of God's salvific plan. From the patriarchal period through the monarchical era, the Old Testament displays a vast array of women who were decisive, bold, intelligent and faithful. The study of women in the Old Testament has received significant attention from scholars. Although academic contributions have touched on a variety of subjects and a number of women and their unique roles in the Old Testament, it is worth investigating how these women became key agents of God in the history of salvation; and how God used them in unimaginable ways to bring about his divine plan for his chosen people, Israel.

The narrative of the Old Testament and the history of Israel would be incomplete and much different without Eve the mother of all the living, Sarah the first matriarch, Hagar the progenitress to the Arab nation, Rebekah the link to the promise, Rachel the shepherdess, Shiphrah and Puah the midwives who defied Pharaoh's selective population control policy in Egypt, the mother of Moses, together with Pharaoh's daughter who rescued Moses from the Nile, Miriam the prophetess, Rahab who saved the Israelite spies, Deborah who delivered the people of Israel from Jabin the King of Hazor and Sisera, Ruth the ancestress of king David, Hannah whose prayers restored stability to Israel and Abigail who saved David from blood guilt, and countless other women. While a great number of others remain unnamed, these women played key roles in Israel's salvation history.

Notwithstanding the above phenomenal roles played by women in the Old Testament, there are several narratives in the Old Testament which present scenes of appalling treatment of women. Only a few would dispute the horror of such stories like the maltreatment of Hagar by Abram and Sarai (Genesis 16, 21), the sexual exploitation of Tamar (Genesis 38) and the killing of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11) and the rape of the Levite's concubine and its aftermath (Judges 19-21).



Alluding to stories such as these and pointing to the patriarchal quality of the Old Testament, some scholars have questioned the “gender dynamics” of the Old Testament. They accuse the Bible of being “indifferent to women, at worst hostile or even at its most awful, violent.”<sup>1</sup> In more recent times some critics of the Bible have proposed that the Bible presents a stranglehold to women’s fight for equality and liberation.<sup>2</sup> Such critics view the Bible as literature that not only disparages women but provides a kind of “sacred canopy”<sup>3</sup> for societies that do not treat women fairly. They question how it can ever be true or possible that a literature that bears such a magnitude of male personalities, ranging from priests and kings to prophets, can ever have a place for women.

Yet, a critical examination of the Old Testament reveals that far from promoting an unfair treatment of women, the Bible actually exemplifies women. Without oversimplifying the horrendousness of the stories of Dinah (Genesis 34), Tamar (Genesis 38), Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11), and the Levite’s concubine (Judges 19:25-30), these stories do not reflect the general image of women in the Old Testament. The presence of these stories and certain other appalling treatments of women in the Bible do not reflect an endorsement of such practices and abuses by the Bible. Affirmatively, Carol Meyers argues that “biblical passages depicting sexual abuse are not approving of it; on the contrary, these horrific human misdeeds call dramatic attention to a flawed society.”<sup>4</sup> The Bible does not approve of a cultural characterization of women as inferior or ancillary to men. As Margaret Mowczko rightly observes:

Many women are described as wise, intelligent, courageous, resourceful, and enterprising. Women functioned as prophets, teachers, advisors, leaders, deliverers, and even as

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<sup>1</sup> Stahlberg, Lesleigh Cushing. "Introduction." *Nashim: A Journal Of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* No. 24 (2013): 5-10. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed February 9, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Kern, Kathi. *Mrs. Stanton's Bible*. Ithaca, (NY [u.a.]: Cornell Univ. Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "Feminism and patriarchal religion: principles of ideological critique of the Bible." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 7, no. 22 (February 1982): 54-66. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed June, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Meyers, Carol L. *Discovering Eve : Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 7.

heroines. Considering the culture of the Old Testament, it is remarkable that so many women are mentioned and that many of these women are named.<sup>5</sup>

It is indeed amazing how a literature produced by a patriarchal society could contain such impressive array of stories about women. Tikva Frymer-Kensky captures this quite succinctly when she says:

The Bible, a product of this patriarchal society is shaped by the concerns of the men of Israel who were involved in public life. As such, it is a public book, concerned with matters of government, law, ritual and social behavior. But why, then, does this clearly androcentric text from a patriarchal society have so many stories that revolve around women? And why are there so many memorable women in the Bible?<sup>6</sup>

In many passages, women are not simply secondary characters who appear in the stories of men; they are chief characters whose decisions were pivotal to the existence of the people of God.

This thesis is a narrative analysis of the role of women as agents of salvation in the Old Testament. It focuses on such figures as Hannah the mother of Samuel and Abigail, the wife of King David, before and during the period of the early monarchy in Israel. Their decisions significantly affected the socio-political landscape of their time. They were in indeed great agents of change and crucial instruments in God's salvific plan. The purpose of this thesis is to examine how these women of the Old Testament were not simply significant personalities in their own right, but how they became agents of God's Salvation. Although some modern thinkers, looking through the lenses of the socio-political issues dealing with gender equality today may be tempted to see the Old Testament women as mere secondary characters in the stories of men, this thesis argues that in different ways, many Old Testament Women played key roles in the society.

The First Chapter establishes the theological and biblical foundation on which this thesis is built, namely: that both man and woman participate in the image and likeness of God

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<sup>5</sup> Mowczko, Margaret. "The Shame of the Unnamed Women of the Old Testament." *Mutuality* 20, No. 2 (2013), 7-9. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed February 27, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *Reading the Women of the Bible*. (New York: Schocken, 2002), xiv.

(Genesis 1:26-28), that this joint participation confers on both an ontological equality and hence, a shared authority over other created things. This chapter also makes the argument that even though the woman is described in the second creation story as helper to man (Genesis 2:18), the word “helper” does not signify inferiority or subordination. Because man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God and have equal authority, they are both called to be agents of God’s salvation. In very many ways, the women of the Old Testament express this shared equality not only by the way in which they supported their male counterparts, but also in their autonomous decisions and actions.

The second chapter examines the roles of a number of women who became partners with God in bringing about his salvific plan. This chapter further highlights the contributions of the women of the patriarchal period down to the time of the Judges. Emerging from the general examination of the importance of women in salvation history, the last two chapters center on two great personalities who I would argue that played essential roles in Israel’s monarchy.

Chapter three explores the contributions of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, in the preparatory period leading up to the establishment of the monarchy in Israel. Hannah was indeed the forerunner to the monarchy and was at the fore front of the reformation of the Israelite priesthood and the rise of prophesy through her son, Samuel. Hannah’s primordial role in the formation of Israel and the emergence of the monarchy cannot be over stated.

The final chapter examines the invaluable role played by the wise Abigail in David’s rise to kingship. She is able to persuasively turn the heart of David away from committing a senseless, revengeful murder. By doing this, she helps David secure his throne, since the one who would be the king and ruler over Israel should be free of the guilt of bloodshed and personal revenge and dedicated to fighting only the battles of the Lord (1 Samuel 25:26-28).

## CHAPTER ONE

### Male-Female Equality and Reflection of the Image and Likeness of God

#### First Creation Account: the Image and likeness of God

The creation of **הָאָדָם** (humanity) in the image and likeness of God is one of the most important statements of Sacred Scripture. Genesis 1:26-27 declares that unlike other created things, humanity bears the image of God

Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth. God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”<sup>7</sup>

On this theological anthropology of Genesis, hinges the entire message of the Bible. Yet, it is also true that it is one of the major contentious statements of the Old Testament.

The first creation story (Gen 1:26) uses the term **אָדָם** (*ā-dām*) which, although frequently translated in a majority of English versions of the Bible as “Man”, more properly refers to mankind or humanity.

Perhaps, a textual analysis of the text will elucidate more on this. Adam, as used in Genesis 1:26, more properly refers to the generic species of humanity which includes both man and woman. Genesis 1: 27 specifies that God made them male and female in his image: **“וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצִלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:”** “And God created man in his own image. In the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.” In the above, we notice that while **הָאָדָם** is in the singular, there is a transition from a singular pronoun **אֹתוֹ** (him) to plural pronoun **אֹתָם** (them). Therefore, **אָדָם** as used in the above passage is a compound noun comprising of both male and female. The term “man” does not capture this compound nature of the being thus created by God in Genesis 1:26-27).

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<sup>7</sup> New American Bible - Revised Edition (NABRE). All other quotations in this work shall be from the Jewish Study Bible, except where otherwise stated.

There is no doubt then that both man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God, the obvious significance is that both gender share in God's dominion and rule over the animal world. The psalmist captures this privileged position of humanity:

You have made him little less than divine,  
and adorned him with glory and majesty;  
you have made his master over Your handiwork,  
laying the world at his feet,  
Sheep and oxen, all of them,  
And wild beasts, too;  
the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea,  
Whatever travels the paths of the seas (Psalm 8:5-8).

The creation of **בְּצֶלְמֵךָ** (male and female), in the image and likeness of God confers on both the male and female an ontological equality. They share equal authority over other created things. To fulfil the command (be fruitful and multiply) they have to do that as male and female, not as individuals. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that:

Man and woman have been created, which is to say willed by God: on the one hand, in perfect equality as human persons; on the other, in their respective beings as man and woman...man and woman are both with one and the same dignity 'in the image of God'.<sup>8</sup>

By being created in the image and likeness of God, women are sharers in God's divine life and as such are directed also to the same earthly task like her male counterparts. They are both commanded to be fertile and increase, and are both vested with the authority to master the animal world (Gen 1:28).

## **Second Creation Account and the Equality of Man and Woman**

While the first account of creation as considered above, supports the claim that man and woman, by both sharing in the image and likeness of God, are equal in status, the second account of creation has been the subject of many controversies with regard to the equality of man and woman.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton makes the distinction even much more apparent when she argues that "the first account dignifies woman as an important factor in the creation, equal in

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<sup>8</sup>Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2008, No 369

power and glory with man. The second makes her an afterthought. The world is in good running order without her, the only reason for her advent being the solitude of man.”<sup>9</sup> Stanton is obviously suspicious of the second account of creation and does not hide this view. She is convinced that “the second story was manipulated by some Jews, in an endeavor to give heavenly authority for requiring a woman to obey the man she married.”<sup>10</sup> While Stanton’s hermeneutics are not supported by many biblical scholars today, it is not uncommon to find those who argue for the inequality of women and men pointing to the second creation narrative (Gen 2:4b-24). Stanton however insists that “the masculine and feminine elements, exactly equal and balancing each other, are as essential to the maintenance of the equilibrium of the universe as positive and negative electricity, the centripetal and centrifugal forces, the laws of attraction which bind together all we know of this planet”<sup>11</sup>

Some biblical exegetes, preachers and casual readers of Genesis contend that the second creation account provides evidence that although man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God, they are not necessarily equal. Among other arguments, they maintain that because the woman was created from the rib (מִצַּלְעָתוֹ) of man (Gen 2:21) and as עֲזָרָה “helper” to man (Gen 2:20), and since the woman in the second Genesis account of creation was named by man (Gen 2:23), the woman is not equal to the man in status. Again, the second Genesis narrative explicitly indicates that the woman was to be ruled by the man following their disobedience (Gen 3:16). We shall examine the male-female problem of equality utilizing the above objections.

**“I will make a fitting helper for him...” (Gen 2:18).**

There is an assumption that the word “helper” automatically means servant. Based on this assumption, the woman is considered to be a servant of the man. For this reason, women

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<sup>9</sup> Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. *The Woman's Bible*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 20

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 14

ought to be subordinates to men. However, an analysis of the text proves this assumption to be false, especially the context in which it was used.

The word used is עֵזֶר ('ezer) which is taken from the verb “to help”. The noun means “one who helps”. There is no connotation of inferiority or subordination from עֵזֶר and it is difficult to see how the word could connote inferiority to the ancient readers of the text. To understand the meaning of the עֵזֶר more clearly, we need to consider the qualifying phrase כְּנָגְדּוֹ “fitting for him”. The word עֵזֶר as it is used in the description of the woman carries no connotation of status. Fit for him, means, corresponding to him. Therefore the woman was one “corresponding to” man and not subordinate to him. Philip Payne argues that כְּנָגְדּוֹ “fitting for him” highlights the strength of the woman “to be an equal partner with man, rescuing him from being alone. She is his counterpart: his companion and friend who complements him in exercising dominion over the earth.” Accordingly, the woman fulfills the man “so that together they can be fruitful and care for the earth.”<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth A. McCab further argues that:

The customary translation of these two words עֵזֶר כְּנָגְדּוֹ as a “helper” or a “helpmate suitable” (for man), despite its near universal adoption, is wrong. That is not what the words are intended to convey. They should be translated instead to mean approximately “a power equal to man.” That is, when God concluded that He would create another creature so that man would not be alone. He decided to make “a power equal to him,” someone whose strength was equal to man’s. Woman was not intended to be merely man’s helper. She was to be instead his partner.<sup>13</sup>

While a number of scholars support the above argument of McCab, it is important to note that when the Bible uses the word “helper” in most instances, it does not mean subordinate or servant. The same word, עֵזֶר, which is used to describe the woman in relation to the man is used in several other places in the Old Testament to describe God's relationship with his people. For instance, Psalm 33:20 describes God as עֵזֶר to his people: וְנִשְׁכָּנֵנוּ חֶסֶדָּהּ לְיִהוָה “We set our hope on the Lord/ He is our help and shield.” Genesis 49:25 also

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<sup>12</sup> Payne, Philip B. "The Bible Teaches the Equal Standing of Man and Woman." *Priscilla Papers* 29, no. 1 (2015): 3. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed February, 7, 2017),

<sup>13</sup>McCabe, Elizabeth A. *Women in the Biblical World: A Survey of Old and New Testament Perspectives*. Lanham, (Md: University Press of America, 2009), 22.

uses the term “helper” to describe God: “...by the God of your father who will help you/ by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above/ blessings of the deep that crouches beneath/ blessings of the breasts and of the womb.” It is ludicrous to suggest that God is inferior to mankind or subordinate to man simply because he is described as helper. Although the English word “helper”, sometimes connotes a servant, or an inferior, as in the case of “house help” this is certainly not true in the Genesis description of the woman as helper.

**“And the Lord God fashioned the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman...”**  
**(Gen 2:22)**

Some scholars argue that since Eve was created from the side of Adam she is inferior to him. Simone de Beauvoir for instance, states that:

Eve was not fashioned at the same time as the man; she was not fabricated from a different substance, nor of the same clay as was used to model Adam; she was taken from the flank of the first male. Not even her birth was independent; God did not spontaneously choose to create her as an end in herself and in order to be worshiped directly by her in return for it. She was destined by Him for man; it was to rescue Adam from loneliness that He gave her to him, in her mate was her origin and her purpose; she was his complement on the order of the inessential. Thus she appeared in the guise of privileged prey.<sup>14</sup>

This is a misreading of Genesis 2:22. Against this position, St. Thomas Aquinas offers the reason for the creation of the woman from the side of the man. He maintains that the reason God created the woman from the rib of a man was firstly “to signify the social union of man and woman.”<sup>15</sup> He further contends that “the rib belonged to the integral perfection of Adam, not as an individual, but as the principle of the human race”<sup>16</sup> and as such, would be the most fitting place from which the woman was created. In what William Barclay describes as fanciful exegesis, a rabbinic piece states that:

God did not form woman out of the head lest she should become proud; nor out of the eye lest she should lust; nor out of the ear, lest she should be curious; nor out of the mouth lest she should be talkative; nor out of the heart lest she should be jealous; nor out of the hand lest she should be covetous; nor out of the foot lest she should be a wandering

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<sup>14</sup> Pardes, Ilana, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach*, 18

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia, Q. 92, Art. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid



busybody; but out of the rib which was always covered; therefore modesty should be her primary quality.<sup>17</sup>

God, by choosing to create the woman from the rib of the man, emphasizes the close connection between man and woman. It was not a statement about social status but about their union. Moreover, rather than indicate subordination and hence inferiority, the creation of the woman from the side of Adam and not from a separate order like the animals (Gen. 2:19-20) stresses the distinct and fundamental identity of man and woman. If, as earlier indicated, the word אָדָם (Adam) connotes humanity, being created from the rib of Adam expresses the true humanity of the woman.

Again, some scholars have argued that rather than inferiority, the chronological priority of Adam to Eve more fittingly supports Eve's superiority. Frances Willard argues that "if we find God gradually advancing in his work from the inorganic earth to the mineral kingdom, then to the vegetable kingdom, and last of all making man, the fact that woman is made after man suggests her higher qualities rather than man's superiority." She therefore concludes that "it takes an immense amount of ingenuity to make out women's inferiority from the simple scale of creation presented in God's word."<sup>18</sup>

**Then the man said, "This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called woman (אִשָּׁה) for from man (אָדָם) was she taken" (Gen 2:23)**

Gerhard Von Rad notes that "name-giving in the ancient orient was primarily an exercise of sovereignty, of command."<sup>19</sup> However, the fact that Adam names the woman, while signifying authority does not mean that he dominates her and consequently makes her inferior to him. Adam gives the name, *'ishsha* to indicate her union with him: "from *'ish* was

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<sup>17</sup> Barclay, William. *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Corinthians*. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1975), 98.

<sup>18</sup> Frances Willard: Mrs Stanton's bible page 87 (quoted from Willard ed., women in the pulpit, 162, 90. (Kern, Kathi. *Mrs. Stanton's Bible*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.)

<sup>19</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis, A Commentary*, tr. by John H. Marks, The Old Testament Library (London: The Westminster Press, 1961), 56f, quoted in Otwell, John H. *And Sarah Laughed. The Status of Woman in the Old Testament*. (New York: American Council of Learned Society, 2010), 18.

she taken” מְאִישׁ לְקַחָהּ זָאת (Gen 2:23), and not to signify her social status. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott maintains that the above text “uses a pun on the Hebrew words for man and woman to emphasis the oneness of the human race: this shall be called woman (‘ishshah) for from man (‘ish) was this taken.”<sup>20</sup> Rather than an indication of authority and domination, Adam’s naming of the woman could be interpreted as an “occasion for a statement of a union of husband and wife in which the husband leaves his own parents (v.24).”<sup>21</sup>

In many instances in the Old Testament, it is the woman who names the children. Eve names Cain and Seth (Gen 4:1, 25), Pharaoh’s daughter names Moses (Exodus 2:10); Leah and Rachel name the twelve sons of Israel (Gen. 29:32-35, 31:21,35:19-21) that will become the twelve tribes of Israel, the wife of Manoah names her son Samson (Judg 13:24); and Hannah names Samuel (1Sam 1:20). There is also no evidence in the Bible to suggest that these women had authority and dominion over their children. There is no evidence also to suggest that because these men were named by their mothers, they were therefore inferior to their mothers nor does it mean that the mothers had more authority over their children than the fathers.

**“And to the woman He said, “I will make most severe Your pangs in childbearing; in pain shall you bear children. Yet, your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16).**

The above passage which comes from the punishment of the woman for her role in the disobedience of God’s command is the first mention of Adam’s rule over the woman in the Bible. Although many preachers and scholars have often cited this passage to justify the argument that women should be under the authority of men, not all scholars agree.

With regard to the implication of the punishment, John Otwell provides a textual

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<sup>20</sup> Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey. *Women, Men and the Bible*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977), 132.

<sup>21</sup> Otwell, John H. *And Sarah Laughed. The Status of Woman in the Old Testament*, 18

analysis of the woman's punishment by God and argues for a sexual dependence of Eve on Adam rather than authority and domination of Adam over the woman:

In the structure of Hebrew poetry, the second half of a line (which appears as the second line in an English translation) is related closely in content to the first half. Thus, "in pain you shall bring forth children" duplicates "your pain in childbearing." We may expect, therefore, that "and he shall rule over you" parallels "your desire shall be for your husband." Thus the husband's rule would seem to lie either in the wife's need for the husband because of her desire to have children, or in the strength of his sexual attraction for her. This is not an abstract statement of the subordination of the woman to the man in all relationships, and it also says nothing about the power of the woman over the man.<sup>22</sup>

According to the above argument, the woman is sexually dependent on her husband.

It is not a declaration of the authority of the man over the woman in all spheres of life. Of course, there is no indication that the man himself would be sexually independent. Because God created Adam and the woman from the beginning to be equal, Philip Payne points out that this "...is not a prescription of what should be. Like every other result of the fall, it is a negative change."<sup>23</sup> Since, it was the woman who took the lead in eating of the fruit they were forbidden to eat, God as it were punishes her by subjecting her to the lead of Adam. It is important to note that God identifies this punishment as a direct consequence of their disobedience.

God's punishment of the woman is not to be read as a decree that provides the basis for women's subjugation by men. The author of Genesis herein describes the sad and servile state of women in ancient Israel which is explained here as a consequence of their disobedience. This ugly reality was not part of divine intention. It is therefore not a prescription of what the ideal society should be but a description of the current state, and the "quality of life in a fallen world."<sup>24</sup> Philys adds that Genesis 3:16, is "not a license for male supremacy, but rather it is a condemnation of that pattern. Subjugation and supremacy are perversions of creation."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>23</sup> Payne, Philip B, "The Bible Teaches the Equal Standing of Man and Woman.", 3

<sup>24</sup> Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey. *Women, Men and the Bible*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984) 133

<sup>25</sup> Pardes, Ilana. *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach*, 25

In the second naming of the woman as Eve (Gen 3:20), Adam makes a great theological declaration. By naming the woman חַוְּוָה “mother of the living”, Adam affirms that life would still continue despite the difficult conditions that their disobedience has brought to them (Gen 3:14-19). This was indeed a positive response to God’s punishment. God himself is pleased with this response and shows this by upgrading their wardrobe from fig leaves (Gen 3:7) to animal skins (Gen 3:20). Thus, he signals that he will be with them as they start a new phase of life outside of Eden.

A careful reading of the creation stories reveals a dimension of Eve’s personality that is of greater interest. Eve plays very pivotal roles throughout the entire second creation narrative. In some way, her role in the “first family” seems to overshadow that of Adam. In fact, Stanton maintains that “the conduct of Eve from the beginning to the end is so superior to that of Adam.”<sup>26</sup>

Eve’s equality with Adam is demonstrated by her ability not only to make a decision for herself, but by her ability to influence her husband’s decision (Gen 3:6). This could be considered a cardinal sign of true equality and independence. She does not defer to the serpent and say, “let me consult with my husband to see if he thinks I should eat the fruit”, rather she decides freely, independently, and with complete autonomy: “When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate” (Gen 3:6). In this act, one can also argue that the woman demonstrated her equality with Adam. It is significant to note that while we are presented with Eve’s motive for eating the fruit, the narrative is silent about Adam’s motive. We are left to guess whether he also saw that the tree was good for eating, a delight for his eyes and desirable as a source of wisdom or whether he ate of the tree simply in obedience to the woman’s request.

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<sup>26</sup>Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, *The Woman's Bible*, 26

Reflecting on Eve's dialogue with the serpent, Philys argues that the first woman was "intelligent, perceptive, informed theologian or exegete who, unlike her passive partner, is familiar with the divine command and doesn't hesitate to reflect it. Woman's decision to eat of the fruit of knowledge is accordingly seen as a courageous act which above all reflects her quest for knowledge."<sup>27</sup> While the above arguments offer very useful insight in the appreciation of the woman, it is plausible to assume that the man was the transmitter of the divine command to the woman since the command was given prior to the creation of the woman (Genesis 2:16-17). In the light of this, Stanton offers a justification for Eve's action. She maintains that:

The command not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge was given to the man alone before woman was formed, Genesis ii, 17. Therefore the injunction was not brought to Eve with the impressive solemnity of divine voice, but whispered to her by her husband and equal. It was a serpent supernaturally endowed, seraphim...who talked with Eve, and whose words might reasonably seem superior to the second-hand story of her companion. Nor does the woman yield at once.<sup>28</sup>

Again to the woman's credit, it does appear that she took very seriously God's injunction to Adam. Not only does she correct the serpent when the serpent misrepresents God's command (Gen 3:1), but she adds that they were not allowed to touch it (compare Gen 2:15-17; 3:3). While God only mentions eating, Eve mentions that they were not even to touch. In a way, it can be argued that Eve by including the "touch" element was putting a fence around the law as a way of protecting it. Eve is aware that eating the fruit presupposes touching. To avoid the eating, one must avoid the touching.

It is important to note that before their disobedience, Adam describes the woman only from her relationship with him: "She shall be called woman because she was taken from man" (Gen 2:23b). After the rebellion and punishment, she assumes a new role and her identity is no longer directly tied to the man but to the rest of humanity. Her participation in the divine creative process through procreation will be highlighted by her husband Adam:

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<sup>27</sup>Pardes, Ilana *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach*, 24

<sup>28</sup> Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, *The Woman's Bible*, 26

“The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all the living” (Gen 3:20).

Adam also emphasizes herein that their disobedience has not altered God’s initial design for them. Despite the difficulties that their disobedience has brought, Eve, the mother of the living, will continue to be a source of life. As earlier noted, it was Eve who named Cain and Seth (Gen 4:1, 25). Considering that this was after their disobedience and after God had said to Eve that she would be “ruled” by her husband, her naming of the children instead of Adam, would suggest that her role in the first family was not marginal despite their sin.

An analysis of the names Eve chooses reveals that she is indeed a theologian of some sort who possesses a graced understanding of faith in God. By choosing the name קַיִן (Cain) for her first child, she makes an important theological statement. The fact that the Genesis narrative presents this birth and naming event after the punishment from God indicates Eve’s strong belief that despite their sin, God was still responsible for them and provides them with their needs: “I have gained (קָנִיתִי) a male child with the help of the Lord” (Gen 4:1). Again she seems to rejoice too that “she has been allowed to share in the creative work of Yahweh, who made the first man.”<sup>29</sup> She proclaims that God is with her continuing life even after their sin. This is also an acknowledgement that the birth of Cain was a combination of both human participation, and divine intervention, hence pro-creation.

Eve’s theological insight is also very evident in her naming of Seth. She reiterates and emphasizes with confidence, God’s presence and support: “God has provided (נָתַן) me with another offspring in place of Abel”, for Cain had killed him” (Gen 4:25). It is interesting how the story of the birth of Seth sets humanity in a new and hopeful path. With Seth’s first son, Enosh the chapter ends on a very positive note: “At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD” (Genesis 4:26). Based on Eve’s role in the creation narrative, one could argue that she, not Adam, is the protagonist.

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<sup>29</sup> Vawter, Bruce CM. *Genesis. A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*. (London: Nelson, 1984), 182.

Nevertheless, equality between male and female should not be viewed as an undifferentiated sameness. The equality between the male and female is one that also recognizes functional differences:

The very fact that God created human beings in the dual modality of male and female cautions us against an unqualified equation of the two sexes. This profound and beautiful distinction, which some belittle “as a matter of mere anatomy,” is not a biological triviality or accident. God has no intention of blurring sexual distinctness in the interests of equality *in an unqualified sense*.<sup>30</sup>

There are certain roles that are distinctively male, just as there are those that are distinctively female. The complementarity of roles brings about harmony and leads to the fulfillment of God’s command to man to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28). There are multiple instances in the Old Testament where great women play major roles in the wellbeing of their immediate community. In this way, they fulfilled the divine command to be productive inhabitants of God’s creation and left visible footprints in the sand of the Old Testament times. We shall now examine some of these women who courageously responded to God’s call and thus became integral participants in the story of salvation history in the patriarchal history, the exodus and the early historical period.

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<sup>30</sup> Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr, “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship (Genesis 1-3)”, *1997 Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, (2005): [https://bible.org/seriespage/3-male-female-equality-and-male-headship-genesis-1-3#P102\\_28614](https://bible.org/seriespage/3-male-female-equality-and-male-headship-genesis-1-3#P102_28614)

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Women as Agents of God's Salvific Plan in Genesis, Exodus and Early Historical Period of the Old Testament**

The women of the Old Testament were not merely peripheral. The Old Testament contains a plethora of women who were central in shaping the salvation history of the people of Israel. These women, at various historic moments in the life of Israel took bold and decisive steps in effecting great changes that would ultimately lead to the realization of God's design. Notwithstanding the patriarchal bias of the time in which they lived, these women in their respective ways, became agents of God's salvific plan not just for Israel but for humanity. Their lives and actions bear eloquent testimony against claims that women of the Old Testament were generally "suppressed or portrayed unsympathetically."<sup>31</sup> Rather, their stories show that,

The status of the woman in the Old Testament is high. She is given the honor due to one in whom God acts directly and uniquely. She exercised full participation in the life of the community. Because the Old Testament is a God-centered literature, the role of woman is best stated as a sustaining of the people of God. She also participated fully and really in the common life of the people.<sup>32</sup>

Generally, the women of the Old Testament were not treated as mere appendices of the male characters but had their own unique missions and vocations. We will consider a number of these women who played various roles as matriarchs, prophetesses, shepherdesses, judges and mothers.

#### **A Litany of the Matriarchs**

A close examination of the narratives in the Patriarchal era reveals a rich collection of great women identified as matriarchs. J. Cheryl Exum, observes that "though frequently ignored in the larger picture of Israel's journey towards the promise, the matriarchs act as strategic points that move the plot, and thus the promise, in the proper direction towards its

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<sup>31</sup>Bird, Phyllis A. *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 53

<sup>32</sup>Otwell, John H. *And Sarah Laughed. The Status of Woman in the Old Testament*, 193



fulfillment”.<sup>33</sup> Through the matriarchs, Israel becomes a people numerous and blessed. Sarah guarantees Isaac’s inheritance against the threat of Ishmael. Rebekah sees to it that Jacob obtains the blessing. And Rachel and Leah, in their competition to provide Jacob with sons, build up the house of Israel.”<sup>34</sup>

Among the matriarchs are some women who fall into the “barren mothers” type stories. Although some scholars prefer the “barren women” usage rather than “barren mothers”, the latter more fittingly captures the divine element in this kind of biblical narrative. The barren mother type scenes are stories of women who were considered barren but who will eventually give birth to important actors in the drama of the history of salvation. Joan Cook categorizes the barren mother stories into three models: competition stories, promise stories and request stories.<sup>35</sup>

A competition story is characterized by a wifely rivalry between two women, one who is fertile and the other who is considered barren. Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, Hannah and Peninnah are the most notable examples of wifely rivalry stories. The promise model depicts women who are considered barren but who will receive a birth announcement from a messenger of God. Usually the sons born to these women are given special names that depict their missions. Significant women in this promise category are: Sarah the mother of Isaac, Manoah’s wife who becomes the mother of Samson, and Hannah the mother of Samuel. In the request model, we have barren women who take the initiative to either confront God about their barrenness, like Hannah the wife of Elkanah, or in the case of Rachel who confronts Jacob. Rebekah also belongs to this category. Her husband Isaac makes the request to God on her behalf. In this section, we will limit our analysis of the barren mothers to the patriarchal period: Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel.

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<sup>33</sup> Letty M. Russel. *Feminist interpretation of the Bible*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985.), 76, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>35</sup> Cook, Joan E. *Hannah's Desire, God's Design: Early Interpretations of the Story of Hannah*. (Sheffield: Sheffield Acad. Press, 1999), 14-19.

## **Sarah, the Matriarch**

Sarah is the wife of Abraham God's first covenant partner,<sup>36</sup> and the mother of Isaac through whom both Jews and Christians trace their relationship to Abraham. The Old Testament present Abraham as a man of great faith who acts trustingly based on God's directive, yet, at various moments in Abraham's life, it is Sarah who actually takes the lead. Her role in Abraham's life is key to his success. However, she is not simply an appendix to the mission of Abraham; she has her own destiny and mission, and as such is a major character in the entire narrative. We shall consider some of these instances where we see Sarah play pertinent roles in the family.

The survival and success of Abram in Egypt is only possible with the assistance of Sarai who agrees to be identified as his sister instead of his wife. In fact, it is logical to suppose that Abram's life was in her hands. It is very likely that if she had refused Abram's scheme, his life would have been endangered in Egypt (Gen 12:10-20). Hence, in this wife-sister type story in which the husband endangers the wife for his own protection (Gen 12:10-20, 20:1-18, 26:1, 6-11), Sarai becomes a kind of savior for Abram.

Sarai is also a courageous woman who is not afraid to take matters into her own hands. Aware of her own infertility, she proposes an alternative to God's divine plan of making Abram the father of a multitude of nations. Following the Mesopotamian custom, which allowed surrogate motherhood for a barren woman, Sarai proposes that Abram take Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant and have children by her (Gen 16:1-2). Abram does not object to this proposal (Gen 16:3). At this point, it seems Abram himself is giving up on God's promise for him.

The change of name from Sarai to Sarah (Gen 17:15) which is a narrative of the priestly authors, shows that in the same way that God gives Abraham a particular destiny,

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<sup>36</sup> Nowell, Irene. *Women in the Old Testament*, (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 3.

God also gives Sarah her destiny and mission. In the same way that Abraham is blessed, God also blesses Sarah: “I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of people shall issue from her” (Gen 17:16).

Again, when Sarah suggests out of jealousy or fear of the ascendancy of Ishmael after Abraham’s death, that Abraham drives out Ishmael and his mother, God tells him to follow her instructions (Gen 21:12). In fact in this particular case, it appears that God mandates him to follow the directive of Sarah. This is not only an example of a woman taking on a leadership role in her family; it is also an example of God endorsing her initiative. Through Sarah’s direction and Abraham’s obedience, she founds an additional multitude of nations as God promised he would achieve through Ishmael (Gen 16:10-12). One cannot tell the story of the early beginnings of Israel without noting the indispensable role played by Sarah. Janice Nunnally-Cox observes that:

There does appear to be a surprising amount of equality between Sarah and Abraham. She appears to say what she wants, when she wants, and Abraham at times responds in almost meek obedience. He does not command her; she commands him, yet there seems to be an affectionate bond between them. Abraham does not abandon Sarah during her bareness, nor does he gain other wives while she lives, as far as we know. The two have grown up together and grown old together, and when Sarah dies, Abraham can do nothing but weep. Sarah is a matriarch of the first order: respected by rulers and husbands alike, a spirited woman and bold companion.<sup>37</sup>

Just like the patriarchs, Sarah’s burial at Mamre receives an extended attention. It is very remarkable that an entire chapter is dedicated to her death and burial (Gen 23:1-20). Abraham’s purchase of Sarah’s burial place gives him a significant legal hold in the land of Canaan (Gens 23:14-19).

### **Hagar the Progenitress**

The story of Hagar is both pathetic and interesting. She is introduced as the Egyptian slave girl to the house of Abraham (Gen 16:1). It is easy to dismiss Hagar as a simple Egyptian slave girl in the Abraham story; however, a deeper analysis of Hagar in the narrative clearly indicates that she takes on a very specific and major role in the story. She is

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<sup>37</sup> Nunnally-Cox, Janice. *Foremothers: Women of the Bible*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 9.

not a minor character but a major one, like Sarah, the wife of Abraham. Hagar is the mother of Ishmael through whom Muslims trace their relationship to Abraham, thus she is a progenitress.

Hagai is the first woman in the Old Testament to receive a birth announcement. While fleeing from Sarai, her mistress, the Lord came to rescue her through his messenger, and said to her: “I will greatly increase your offspring and they shall be too many to count” (Gen 16:10). In this sense, Hagar is an Abraham-like figure. In the same way God promises to make Abram great through his descendants (Gen 15:5; 22:17), God also promises to make Hagar great through her son and his descendants. In the same way that Abraham is a patriarch, the father of a great nation, Hagar is a matriarch, she is the mother of a great nation. She is promised descendants just as other (male) ancestors are promised descendants. Ishmael, the son of Hagar, will become the father of twelve tribes (Gen 25:12-18).

Though the Hagar story seems to be only a few lines within the Abraham narrative, it is significant when viewed within the larger storyline of Genesis and Exodus. In a way, Hagar, the slave girl’s story prefigures the hardship of the Israelites who become slaves in Egypt and are maltreated by the Egyptians. Like Hagar who wanders in the desert and faces life-threatening challenges, including the search for water, fleeing from Sarah, the Israelites will also wander in the desert facing life-threatening situations that would lead to bitter complaints about the lack of food and water. In the same way that God provides for Hagar in the desert, he also provides for the people of Israel. The only difference between God’s intervention in the situation of Hagar and the people of Israel is that God asks Hagar to go back to her master (Genesis 16:9), but God does not ask the people of Israel to return to Egypt (Numbers 14:13).

It is important to note that Hagar is supported by God in all her struggles. She is indeed favored by God who keeps watch over her and fights for her. She is the first woman to

whom God reveals himself directly in the Old Testament (Gen 16:13). God spoke to her through the angel (Gen 16:7-11):

I will greatly increase your offspring, and they shall be too many to count.” The Angel of the Lord said to her further, “Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has paid heed to your suffering. He shall be a wild ass of a man; His hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; he shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen (Gen. 16:10-11).

It is no wonder that she is personally connected with God and is the only woman in the Bible to give a name to God: “And she called the Lord who spoke to her, “You are El-roi’, by which she meant, “Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!” (Gen 16:13). The role of Hagar as progenitress becomes even more evident in the second expulsion story where she saves her son Ishmael and leads him in the direction of becoming the father of a Nation by getting a wife for him from Egypt (Genesis 21: 17-20). Hagar remains a significant person in the history of the patriarchs and stands out as one of the greatest women of the Old Testament.

### **Rebekah the Link to the Promise**

Rebekah’s role is central to the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham through his descendants. She played a determinative role in the direction of Israel and works as God’s partner in bringing about God’s will. The entire legacy and identity of Abram as the father of a multitude of nations is dependent on his son Isaac since God promises to bless Abraham only through his offspring (Gen 15:6). To carry on this promise to the next generation, Abraham in his old age decides to get a wife for his son:

And Abraham said to the senior servant of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, "Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac." And the servant said to him, "What if the woman does not consent to follow me to this land, shall I then take your son back to the land from which you came?" Abraham answered him, "On no account must you take my son back there! The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from my native land, who promised me on oath, saying, 'I will assign this land to your offspring'- He will send His angel before you, and you will get a wife for my son from there. And if the woman does not consent to follow you, you shall then be clear of this oath to me; but do

not take my son back there." So the servant put his hand under the thigh of his master Abraham and swore to him as bidden. (Gen. 24:5-9)

What is obvious from the above instruction which Abraham gives to his servant is that the consent of the woman to be chosen is essential to the success of their mission. The "Yes" or "No" of Rebekah to Isaac's marriage proposal is therefore, a critical one. A "yes", would mean that the promise of God to Abraham will continue; a "No" on the other hand, entails at least, a truncation of God's promise to make Abraham a father to a multitude of nations through Isaac. A close examination of the prayer of the servant on his arrival at the well buttresses the importance of Rebekah and conveys the significance attached to the "Yes", of the would-be wife to Isaac.

And he said, "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham: Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels'-let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master." (Gen 24:12-14).

No sooner had the servant arrived the well, than Rebekah appeared (Gen 24:15). Her hospitable character is evident in her immediate willingness to help Abraham's servant with a drink (Gen 24:17-23). Her hospitality to Abraham's servant at the well is reminiscent of Abraham's hospitality to the three angels by the oaks of Mamre (Gen 18:2-5). While Rebekah is simply being hospitable to the stranger, she is unaware that her action is a confirmation of God's plan. In the end, she comes to realize that the stranger had a more pertinent mission. Far from being a thirsty wanderer, he is actually an emissary for God. And Rebekah, far from being a simple hospitable woman, becomes the link to the promise.

It is germane to note that even after Bethuel, Rebekah's father and Laban her brother had agreed to let Rebekah go with the Abraham's servant, the family leaves it up to Rebekah herself to make the final decision whether to go or not: "And they called Rebekah, and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?' And she said, 'I will go'" (Gen 24:58). Her decision was crucial to the entire mission. The "Yes" of Rebekah was also a sign of God's fidelity to his

oath to Abraham.

Furthermore, Rebekah continues to play a determinative role after her marriage. She is not simply a minor character in the story of Isaac. As wife to Isaac, God speaks to Rebekah directly. It is to her, not to Isaac, that God reveals the mystery of the two nations (Esau and Jacob) that will emerge from her womb (Gen 25:23). Through this revelation, God discloses to her which of her two sons would be God's choice. Isaac, who is not privy to this information, sought to maintain the status quo by blessing Esau the first born, while Rebekah who knows that the "elder shall serve the younger" (Gen 25:23), immediately aligns herself with God's plan by choosing Jacob as the one to inherit the promise. When she overhears her husband Isaac planning to bless Esau before his death, she schemes a counter plot that replaces Esau with Jacob. Rebekah shows great talent in her ability to predict the exact *litmus test* that Isaac intends to apply to Esau as the final confirmation for the conferral of his blessing. She therefore, prompts Jacob to disguise himself like Esau and receive the blessing in his place (Gen 27:5-27). In the case of Jacob, one can argue that God uses Rebekah to overturn the social order in ancient Israel which confers the right of heir on the first born (Gen 25:25; Deut. 21:15-17)

Rebekah can be viewed as a kind of Abraham in her own right. Like Abraham, she leaves her homeland to a place and to a people that she had never known before (Genesis 12:4; 24:57-61). Like Abraham who goes out to welcome strangers (Gen 18:2-5), Rebekah goes out to welcome strangers and to treat them hospitably (Gen 24:15-20). She is a strong-minded person. Rebekah, and not Isaac, decides who will continue the covenant promise. Rebekah, no doubt, is central to the promise God established with Abraham. Her "Yes" makes the promise to be fulfilled through Isaac and her plot, achieves the direction the promise is to take, toward Jacob and not toward Esau.

## Rachel the Shepherdess

The Rachel story reveals to us that while it was customary in ancient Israel for men to be shepherds, the assumption that only men were shepherds is false. In the narrative at the well which describes Jacob's marriage proposal to Rachel, Rachel is presented as a shepherdess: "While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess" (Gen 29:9 NASB). Shepherding was therefore, not an exclusively male job. The story of Rachel reveals that women were also shepherdesses in ancient Israel.

Rachel's story also features a prototype of the barren mother type competition stories of the Patriarchal history. Similar to the conflict between Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah engage in wifely rivalry. While Leah is fertile through God's blessing, Rachel is barren, although she is the favorite of Jacob (Gen 29:30-31). Gradually there is jealousy which builds up into a full-fledged household tension. The names given by Leah to her children clearly express this tension within Jacob's household:

Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuben for she declared, "I means: 'The Lord has seen• my affliction'; it also means: 'Now my husband will love me.'" She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, "This is because the Lord heard c that I was unloved and has given me this one also"; so she named him Simeon. Again she conceived and bore a son and declared, "This time my husband will become attached to me, for I have borne him three sons." Therefore he was named Levi. She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, "This time I will praise the Lord." Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing (Gen 29:31-35).

Samuel Dresner summarizes the dramatic development in the rivalry between Rachel and Leah as divine pendulum, now swinging towards the one sister and then towards the other. The pendulum begins at the well when Jacob falls in love with Rachel the shepherdess (Gen 29:1-12). Then the pendulum swings over to Leah who is substituted for Rachel on her wedding night in favor of the marriage custom (Gen 29:23-26); then to Rachel who Jacob insists must be given to him also (Gen 29: 25-29); then it goes back to Leah whom the Lord grants the gift of children because He saw how miserable she was (Gen 29:31-35). The pendulum returns to Rachel who gives her handmaid Bilhah to Jacob that she may have children with him (Gen 30:3-8); then Leah whose handmaid Zilpah also bears a son with



Jacob and followed by Leah herself, then to Rachel (Gen 30:9-13) who at this point rather than confront Jacob simply keeps quiet and becomes the victim. The pendulum rests with Rachel after God remembers her and she bears her own son, Joseph (Gen 30:22-24).<sup>38</sup>

In this rivalry, we see the complex and confident personality of Rachel. First, Rachel does not seem to complain when her father Laban gives her sister, Leah to Jacob as a wife in lieu of her. Then, like Sarah, she is not afraid to inform her husband about her predicament. When she could no longer restrain her pent-up anger, heightened by years of watching Leah's children run around the house while she had none, she goes to Jacob and demands that he give her children: "When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die!'" (Genesis 30:1). When she does not receive her demands, she does not respond with a prayer but rather with a plan of action: she gives her maid Bilhah to Jacob as a wife (Gen 30:3) and she bears two sons, Dan and Naphtali who are named by Rachel and not Jacob (Gen 30:4-8).

Eventually God remembers Rachel after she bears in silence the torment of Leah and her children (Gen 30:22-24). Rachel herself acknowledges that it was God who had opened her womb. In the naming of Joseph, she gives credit to God saying: "God has taken away my reproach" (Gen 30:23). It is also important to note that it is Rachel and not Jacob who names her son: "She named him Joseph, saying, 'May the LORD give me another'" (Gen 30:24). Joseph will be the one to save his whole family from famine in Egypt (Gen. 43-45). It is indeed remarkable that in this etiology of the twelve tribes of Israel, both Rachel and Leah occupy the central stage and not Jacob who is nearly passive in all the scenes.

## **The Great Women of the Exodus Event**

From the time of Israel's slavery in Egypt through their wandering in the desert to the Promised Land, the Bible features a number of courageous and faithful women who play

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<sup>38</sup> Dresner, Samuel H. "Rachel and Leah." *Judaism* 38, no. 2 (1989): 152. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed June 2, 2017).

pivotal roles in the actualization of the divine plan. J. Cheryl Exum maintains that “the liberation of Israel from bondage in Egypt begins in the courageous actions –and disobedience- of women... it begins when women refuse to cooperate with oppression, relying on wisdom to foil the designs of foolish pharaoh and thereby bringing life out of threatened death.”<sup>39</sup> Even though these women do not evoke the kind of sentiments that the name Moses evokes in the Exodus experience, their significance in the fulfillment of God’s design, including the very survival of Moses himself cannot be overstressed. Exum is right to note that “Without Moses there would be no exodus, but without these women there would be no Moses.”<sup>40</sup>

### **The Women behind Moses’ Survival and Success**

The very survival of Moses, the human agent of the Exodus and of Israel, would not have been possible without the midwives in Egypt. God uses Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives, to save the Israelite males from being killed after birth. These brave women disobey the evil orders of Pharaoh, who had mandated that the midwives kill all male children born of Hebrew women (Ex 1: 15-22). They lie to Pharaoh by claiming that “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive” (Ex 1:19). Their surprising bold civil disobedience frustrates Pharaoh who now decrees that all Egyptians should cast into the Nile any male born of Hebrew women (Ex 1:22). The mother of Moses is also a key agent of God in his salvific plan for the people of Israel. Although she is not named, in this story,<sup>41</sup> she remains one of the greatest characters in the early beginnings of Israel’s deliverance. She gives birth to “the hero of Israel’s

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<sup>39</sup> Letty Russell *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 80.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>41</sup> She is identified later on as Jochebed in Exodus 6:16-20 by the priestly authors

deliverance”<sup>42</sup> and is determined to disobey the Pharaoh of Egypt and save the life of her child (Ex 2:2-4).

In the actions of the mother of Moses we see great ingenuity. After evading the decrees of pharaoh, she casts her child into the Nile, but not in the way that pharaoh had ordered. Rather than simply throw her child into the Nile, she engages her creativity in the design of an ark reminiscent of Noah’s ark which preserved the little boy’s life and kept him afloat. It is interesting that the same word תִּבְיָה is used to describe both the ark that Noah constructs to save his family in the flood (Genesis 6:14ff) and the basket that Moses’ mother floats him in to save him from drowning (Exodus 2:3). Exum draws a contrast between Noah’s ark and the little ark of Moses: “...The connection between Noah and Moses as saviors who are saved from drowning is inescapable. Whereas Noah builds the ark that saves humanity from destruction, Moses’ mother builds the ark that, by saving its future leader, enables the delivery of Israel from bondage.”<sup>43</sup> By doing this, she is participating in God’s plan to use Moses to rescue the people of Israel from Egypt. Before Moses grows to confront the oppression of his people, his mother shows great courage in resisting the tyrannical command of Pharaoh. She is the one who saves the very one who will save the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt (Ex 2:3).

Again, Pharaoh’s effort to recruit all Egyptians to be agents of genocide is subverted from within his own household. His daughter defies his orders and saves Moses from the Nile. As Irene Nowell notes, “She does not confront her father with his injustice. She simply reverses his command. Rather than cast the Hebrew child into the Nile, she draws Moses out of the Nile. Her action like that of the midwives rendered Pharaoh powerless.”<sup>44</sup> By rescuing the baby Moses from the river and adopting him as a son (Ex 2:5-10), she overturns her father’s evil plan. In her drawing of Moses from the water and naming him מֹשֶׁה (*mō-šeh*) she

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<sup>42</sup> Iren Nowell: *Women in the Old Testament*. 49.

<sup>43</sup> Letty Russell, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 80.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 50

foreshadows in a way, what Moses does in leading the Israelites through the Red Sea. “Just as she drew out of the water a weak foundling despite her father’s law, so Moses will eventually draw his people out of the pharaonic bondage.”<sup>45</sup> The abovementioned exodus events are God’s mysterious ways of fulfilling his will despite wicked intentions of humans.

Another great figure that plays an important role in the life of Moses is Zipporah, his wife. While it is true that God saves the people of Israel from Egypt using Moses, it is also true that Zipporah is Moses’ savior. When God becomes angry with Moses upon his returning to Egypt and is about to kill him, it is his wife, Zipporah who saves him by circumcising his son and then physically or symbolically touching Moses with the foreskin of her son (Exodus 4:18-31). Pardes suggests that “through this ritual of circumcision and the spreading (“touching”) of the blood, Zipporah transforms harmful violence into a regulated expression of violence, turning blood from a potentially signifier of death into a beneficial substance that wards off danger.”<sup>46</sup> Circumcision is the physical sign of this covenant which God made with his people (Gen 17:9-14). Through this act, Zipporah connects Moses with the covenant that God made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. By saving Moses at various stages of his life, these women save the whole Israelite community.

### **Miriam, the Prophetess and Worship Leader**

Miriam is a prophetess who leads the people of Israel in praise and worship of God after the victory at the sea over the Pharaoh and the Egyptians:

Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels. And Miriam chanted for them: Sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea (Ex 15:20-2).

Miriam does not merely share in the vocation of her brothers, Moses and Aaron; she had her own special vocation. The Prophet Micah placed her on an equal ranking with

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<sup>45</sup> Pardes, Ilana Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach, 82.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 83.

Moses and Aaron as one of the great leaders sent by God to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt (Micah 6:4) Ilana Pardes argues that,

Miriam's title as prophetess, the audacity with which she demands to be heard (Numbers 12:1-2), the severity of her punishment (Numbers 12:9ff), and her appearance on Micah's list of national deliverers (despite the order of presentation) all create an impression that her role was far greater than recorded.<sup>47</sup>

Sacred Scripture makes particular mention of Miriam's death (Num 20:1) which indicates the important role she played in the life of the people of Israel.

### **Rahab, the Heroine of Jericho**

The role of Rahab comes to the fore in Israel's successful attempt to enter the Promised Land. Following the death of Moses, Joshua has the audacious task of leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land which at this time was occupied by the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites (Joshua 3:10). To properly assess the fruitfulness of the land and the military might of those who occupy the land, Joshua sends two spies into Jericho on a reconnaissance mission (Joshua 2:1). The outcome of their findings will either embolden the Israelites to proceed and possess the land or discourage them to retreat.

In order to avoid suspicion, the spies choose to establish their base in the house of Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute. Despite the spies' stealthy entry into Jericho and their choice of a prostitute's lodge, their presence is discovered (Joshua 2:2). From this moment, the lives of the spies are at the mercy of Rahab. Fortunately, Rahab is willing to become an accessory to the spies, against her own people, but not without her fair share of the deal.

Because of her occupation, Rahab is probably familiar with bargaining. She strikes a lifesaving deal with the spies that guarantees their safe return home and brings her into the family of Israel. She says to the spies:

Now, since I have shown loyalty to you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will show loyalty to my family. Provide me with a reliable sign B that you will spare the lives

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 11

of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and save us from death." (Joshua 2:12-13).

Whether one sees Rahab as an opportunist or an intelligent woman who knows the power of the Israel's God, there is no doubt that she is a good negotiator. Like Hannah who strikes a deal with God through her vow and receives a child (1Sam 1:11) and like Abigail whose deal with King David saves her and her family from destruction (1Sam 25:31), Rahab's deal saves her and her family. Most importantly, it saves the lives of the spies and boosts the morale of the Israelite army.

Again, it is not unlikely that because of her trade, Rahab has different kinds of contacts with the men of Jericho, and possibly, even those in the Jericho army. This makes her privy to some of the intelligence information about the people of Israel. She knows how powerful the Israelites are and how their God has helped them in their battles. She is therefore, very much aware of the story of the Lord's saving action in behalf of Israel. She says to the spies:

I know that the LORD has given the country to you, because dread of you has fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two Amorite Kings across the Jordan, whom you doomed. When we heard about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you; for the Lord your God is the only God in heaven above and on earth below (Joshua 2:9-11).

The impact of this speech on the spies is evident from the feedback they give to Joshua on their return. They say to Joshua, "The LORD has delivered the whole land into our powers; in fact, all inhabitants of the land quake before us" (Josh 2:24). These words are taken directly from the mouth of Rahab. She can indeed be considered an oracle of salvation to Israel.

Apart from being knowledgeable about God's relationship with the people of Israel, Rahab is also convinced that the God of Israel is the true God, and she is ready and willing to become an instrument for the actualization of the divine plan to lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land. In Rahab, we see a well-informed, intelligent, and perceptive personality. She is able to provide perfect safety for the spies but also able to fabricate a

plausible story for the king's agent who believes her story about the whereabouts of the spies (Josh 2:4-7). She also offers very useful security advice to the spies. She tells them to remain in the hills for three days before attempting to cross the Jordan (Josh 2:15). God uses her to bring about the possession of the land of Canaan by the people of Israel. She is instrumental in the fulfillment of the promise God makes to Israel. Rahab is indeed part and parcel of God's design for the salvation of the world. Much more than a morale booster, Rahab was the voice of God to the spies and Joshua. Her speech was the oracle that Joshua needed in order to march into the land and possess it. Tikva Frymer-Kensky opines that "her allegiance to God and Israel makes her one of Israel's early saviors."<sup>48</sup> She is listed in the Genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5) and praised by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews for her faith (Hebrews 11:31).

## **God's Agents in the Era of Judges**

### **Deborah the Judge and Great Leader**

The book of Judges (chapter 4) presents us with the story of Deborah. Deborah is both a prophetess and judge who leads the people in Israel during the period before the monarchy:

Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophetess; she led Israel at that time. She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would come to her for decisions (Judges 4:4).

As a judge, God used her to save Israel from the hands of their enemies (Judg 2:16, 18; 4:10, 14; 5:1-31). As a prophetess she is the most visible leader of Israel in her time (Judg 4:4-5). It is Deborah who summons the military commander, Barak, and communicates to him what the Lord had instructed (Judg 4:6-7). She commissions Barak and sends him to go and fight Sisera, the general of Jabin's army. Although Barak is a man, he is unwilling to go to war unless Deborah accompanies (Judg 4:8-9). Both Barak and Deborah work together with shared military authority to bring about the defeat of Sisera and his chariots and all his army

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<sup>48</sup> Frymer-Kensky, Tikva *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 35.

(Judg 4:18-23).

It is interesting that nothing is said about Deborah's husband or children except in (4:4) where she is described as: "*esheth lappidoth*". Although "*esheth lappidoth*" is frequently interpreted as "wife of Lappidoth", Exum makes the argument that "*esheth lappidoth*" can also be translated as "fiery woman".<sup>49</sup> Deborah then, was not an appendage to any male figure, either as husband or son. The activities of Deborah in Israel very much portray her as a great and fiery woman who like other judges in Israel made binding decisions on all of Israel and also commanded the Israel army.

Deborah is also described as a mother in Israel (Judges 5:7). Deborah's role as mother is not a typical one like Sarah, Rebekah or Rachael. The narrative does not mention her children. Her motherhood of Israel is in a much broader sense that is not merely biological. She provided direction, brought liberation, protection, care and support for the people both before and during the time of war. Tikva adds that the "observation that mothers protect their young against enemies is a universal one. Deborah, the "mother of Israel," protected the people in time of danger"<sup>50</sup> In the light of the above, Deborah can rightly be called a mother of Israel. Susanne Scholz strongly argues then, that "her superior leadership of Israel, her authoritative advice to the military commander, Barak, and her guidance of ten thousand warriors makes her a heroine who is remembered for her public success, rather than for her children or wifely duties."<sup>51</sup>

### **The Unnamed Mother of Samson**

God chose to save the people of Israel from the Philistines through an unnamed woman, simply identified as the wife of Manoah (Judges 13:2). Although she is unnamed and barren, her role in the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines is key. God chose her as an

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<sup>49</sup> Letty M. Russell *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 85.

<sup>50</sup> Frymer-Kensky, Tikva *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 50.

<sup>51</sup> Newsom, Carol Ann. *The Women's Bible Commentary*. (London: SPCK, 2014), 118.



agent of his plan of deliverance, and revealed himself to her and not her husband, Manoah.

Two basic matriarchal biblical themes are present in the story of Manoah's wife: the barren mother type theme and the birth announcement theme (Judg 13:3). As we have seen already in the stories of Rebekah and Sarah, these themes usually indicate the importance of the child that is to be born. Like the matriarchs of Genesis, she becomes the mother of a great figure, Samson, who will rescue Israel from the hands of the Philistines (Judg 13:5). Unlike Rebekah who confronts God about her barrenness and Rachel who confronts her husband, Manoah's wife is silent about her situation.

An ironic twist in the story of Manoah and his wife is that although Manoah is identified by name, he is not the one that the messenger from God visits. The good news of the deliverance of the Israelites from the hands of the Philistines was first proclaimed to his wife before anyone else in Israel (Judg 13:3). Manoah only gets to know about God's plan of deliverance from his wife (Judg 13:6-7). Throughout this narrative, the wife of Manoah remains the central figure. It is she who names the child and not her husband (Judg 13:14); she, not her husband is also the one who is entrusted with the child's nazirite vow and about what to do for him (Judg 13:7). And because the child is consecrated in her womb, she fulfils the vow on his behalf until he is born.

What is also very evident in the story of Manoah's family is that while Manoah's wife is very familiar with the workings of the divine, Manoah himself is not. While Manoah only realizes that he had seen God after the divine messenger disappears (Judg 13:22), his wife right from her first meeting already felt that she had seen a divine being (Judg 13:6). Again when Manoah fears for his life after realizing that they had seen God (Judg 13:22), she provides a theological insight that calms her husband's fear of imminent death. She is aware that God's acceptance of their sacrifices was an indication of his benevolence towards them "Had God intended to take our lives, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and mean

offering from us, nor let us see all these things; and he would not have made such announcement to us” (Jud 13:23). Although Manoah’s wife’s argument could be a product of simple syllogism, it is also possible that she is familiar with the story of Hagar and knows that although “no one can see God and live” (Judg 13:22-23), when it is a divine initiative, that stipulation is overruled.

### **Ruth, the Ancestress of King David**

Among all the women of the Old Testament thus far considered, Ruth stands out brightly as a great woman whose significance in the Old Testament and salvation history cannot be stressed enough. In the Septuagint, Ruth is the first woman in the Old Testament who has a book named after her. She is also the major character in the book.

Alice L. Laffey and Mahri Leonard-Fleckman observe that even though the story of Ruth was a product of a male dominated culture in which elements of a patriarchal culture were evident, it showcases great “role models for strong, courageous, caring and risk-taking women in a more egalitarian culture.”<sup>52</sup> “Jews consider Ruth the “model of faith, the mother of all converts to Judaism. The rabbis recognized her as a righteous person.”<sup>53</sup> In Ruth we see a selfless and determined personality who is ready to forgo her happiness and independence for the sake of her mother-in-law, Naomi. By this self-emptying, she makes herself available for God’s mysterious design for Israel. By abandoning her own people, her religion, her society and coming back to Bethlehem with Naomi, she thrusts herself into the salvific path of the people of God. Through her decision to remain with Naomi and be part of her religious cult and her history, she freely became an instrument of God’s salvation not just for Israel but for the whole world since through her descendants will come, the Christ.

Just in the same way that Sarai and Rebekah leave their homelands for a foreign land

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<sup>52</sup> Laffey, Alice L., and Mahri Leonard-Fleckman: *Ruth*, (Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2017), xxxix

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., xlix

to begin a new life as the mother of the multitude of nations, Ruth leaves her pagan homeland with Naomi, to a foreign land to become the ancestress to David, thus providing the necessary link between God's promise to Abraham and David through whom the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to Israel is realized.

The elders of Bethlehem link her to the matriarchs: Rachel and Leah. In response to the marriage proposal of Boaz the elders prayed for her saying: "May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel" (Ruth 4:11). They present her in some way as one of the matriarchs of Israel who will be part of the building up of Israel. In fact the elders not only present Ruth in the light of the matriarchs of Israel, but they pray that she does "what it took two Israelite matriarchs and their two "maids" to accomplish."<sup>54</sup> Just in the same way that Rachel and Leah are the mothers of Israel's twelve tribes, Ruth is the great grandmother of king David, who becomes Israel's greatest king. As Irene Norwell, notes, Ruth was the "mother of the covenant people."<sup>55</sup> One can say that the book of Ruth is one that looks back to the matriarchal era, but also looks forward to the monarchical era.

It is significant that at a time when Israel, was looking for a new direction following the chaos that characterized the era of the Judges, Ruth is projected and positioned as part of this new direction in Israel. While the Jewish canon places the book of Ruth among the Writings, the LXX (Septuagint) and non-Jewish translations of the Bible place the book of Ruth after the book of Judges, and before the first book of Samuel. This is not a canonical accident. The placement of the book of Ruth in between Judges and 1 Samuel in the LXX "provides a link between the chaotic period when Israel was ruled by judges and the stories that lead to the establishment of the monarchy which reaches its highest point in the reign of

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 141

<sup>55</sup> Nowell, Irene. *Women in the Old Testament*. (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1997), 94

David”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, as J. Harris et al. point out, “The book of Ruth is a bright light in a dark world...”<sup>57</sup> Hence, “interpreted in its canonical-historical context, then, the book of Ruth appears to be a masterfully crafted response to the politics of despair in Judges”<sup>58</sup>

The author of the book of Judges is aware that the major reason for the political, moral, religious and social disorder in Israel which has lead the people into “moral apathy, religious apostasy, and criminal violence”<sup>59</sup> is the absence of a king (Judg. 21:25). God chose Ruth as an agent of change. Through David, her grandson, Israel will experience great stability. It is therefore not an accident that the book of Ruth ends with the genealogy of David.

What is so amazing in all these great stories of women in the Old Testament is that even without their knowledge, in some cases, and even in the most bizarre situations, they became essential allies of God. They were veritable agents of God’s salvific plan. The following chapter explores more deeply the crucial role of Hannah in the unfolding of Israel’s monarchy.

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<sup>56</sup> Adel Reinhartz, *Ruth: Jewish Publication Society. [Tanakh]: JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 1579

<sup>57</sup> Harris, J. Gordon, Cheryl Anne Brown, and Michael S. Moore. *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 293.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 300

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 295

## Chapter Three

### Hannah and the Foundations of Israel's Monarchy

#### Israel's Transition to Monarchy

The covenantal relationship between God and Israel in Exodus 19 installed God as the divine ruler of Israel:

The Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel." Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that the Lord had commanded him. s All the people answered as one, saying, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the people's words to the Lord. (Exodus 19:3-8).

Through this theocratic relationship, God promised to be the leader and protector of the people and would appoint leaders who would be his visible representative among the people. It is in the light of this arrangement that personalities such as Moses, Joshua, and the Judges were appointed by God to mediate his authority and presence among the Israelite community. While the books of Exodus down to Deuteronomy capture the roles of Moses and Joshua as the visible representatives of God in this theocratic leadership structure, the eventually settlement of the people across the Jordan would lead to a structure that is motivated by the immediate challenges of the Israelite community. The book of Joshua narrates the entry of the Israelites into the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. It also features the allocation of the lands to the twelve respective tribes. The settling of the tribes in different locations immediately leads to conflicts with bordering neighbors. This also necessitates a different kind of leadership structure that meets the existential realities of the moment. Hence, the era of the Judges would witness a more regional than central leadership and activities, a sort of confederation.

An important feature of Judges is that it shows a rather decentralized Israel characterized by charismatic leaders whose activities are regional. Some were military leaders like Othniel (Judg 3:7-11), Barak (Judg 4:14-16), Gideon (Judg 6:11) and Jephthah (Judg 11:32); others were judges and prophetesses like Deborah (Judges 4-5), while others were lone tribal warriors such as Samson (Judg 13, 14, 15). Michael Coogan observes that “although in the framework of the deuteronomic historians, the hostility of neighboring entities is directed against all Israel, the judges seem to have been primarily local elders, and their victories regional rather than national”<sup>60</sup>

The book of Judges further stresses “the inefficiency of the local leaders who could only save and affect their people for a limited time.”<sup>61</sup> Although God comes to their help through various ways and leaders, the lack of a central figure makes it difficult to keep the covenant. Hence we find in judges, a dominant Deuteronomic theme which stresses Israel’s frequent forgetfulness and abandonment of the ways of God. This theme of forgetfulness is captured in the repeatedly used line: “And the Israelites did what was offensive to the Lord” (Judg 2:11; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). Their forgetfulness of God and worship of Baal is often punished by God who hands them over to plunderers. After a while, God raises a judge who delivers them, but shortly after the death of the judge they would relapse again. Judges 3-16 is marked by a cycle of sin-punishment-deliverance and relapse into sin. In some ways, the above line could be considered a hermeneutical key to understanding Judges. Although Israel is sometimes faithful to God, the author of Judges seems to suggest that this is an exception rather than the norm (Judge 10:10-22).

The concluding narratives of the era of Judges captures the confusion and depravity that characterize the period. The corruption of the cult system is exemplified by Micah the

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<sup>60</sup> Coogan, Michael David. *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in Its Context*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 178.

<sup>61</sup> Amit, Yairah: *Judges*. The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 508.

Ephraimite who erects a private shrine and employs a Levite Priest to serve as a private priest for his shrine (Judg 17:1-13). In a narrative reminiscent of the Sodom and Gomorrah story (Gen 19:4-11), we see a decadence in the moral order with the threat of homosexual rape against the visitor from Ephraim by the people of Gibeah-Benjamin and their actual rape of the Ephraimite's (Judg 19:22-25). This murderous act of the Benjaminites and the failure of the city of Gibeah to handover the culprits leads to a holy war between the rest of the tribes of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin during which many of the inhabitants of the city were killed (Judg 20:1-48).

By exposing the pre-monarchical Israel's corporate lack of faithfulness to God which has resulted in "anarchy, civil war, and chaos,"<sup>62</sup> the Deuteronomistic authors justify the need for a faithful national leader who will lead the people back to Yahweh and protect them against their enemies. The pro-monarchy tradition insists that the above moral depravity was a consequence of the absence of a king. One cannot read the book of Judges without noticing the refrain: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judge 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). This refrain was possibly alluding to a centralized power system of governance that the monarchy was to provide.<sup>63</sup> A national leader would help restore Israel to the covenantal relationship with Yahweh. Again, with "the threat of the Philistines that is evident in the cycle of stories concerning Samson (chap 13-16)"<sup>64</sup>, the Deuteronomic historians set the stage for the transformation of Israel's system of government which will also occupy a central place in the book of 1 Samuel.

The institution of the monarchy in Israel is complex and the deuteronomic historians present an ambivalent sentiment. On a broad spectrum, two basic strains emerge in their account of the foundation of the monarchy in Israel: the anti-monarchical and the pro-monarchical strains. While the latter sees the establishment of the monarchy as providential

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<sup>62</sup> Coogan, Michael David. *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in Its Context*, 178.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 178

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 178

and necessary, the former views it as a rejection of the theocratic rule of God and a failed institution *ab initio*.

Scholars also distinguish between two terms used to designate Israelite leaders. While *melek* often refers to the ordinary Canaanite and Hebrew word for king, *nāgîd*, is used in a more military context which translates to “leader or commander”.<sup>65</sup> They note that four traditions can be gleaned from the deuteronomic historians’ presentation of the monarchy. Patrick Reid outlines these four traditions as:

Those which use the word *melek* (“King”) or *māshal* (“to rule”) and are anti-monarchical; the tradition which uses *melek* and is favorable to the institution of kingship; those traditions which use the term *nāghidh* to designate Israel’s leader and which are usually associated with anointing (*māšah*) and charismatic military leadership; the tradition of divine grant of an eternal dynasty to the house of David.<sup>66</sup>

We find the account of the anti-monarchical tradition which uses the term *melek* (king) in Judges. 9; 1 Samuel 8; 10:17-27; 12:1-25; 8:10-12. 1 Samuel 11 captures the pro-monarchical tradition who use the term *melek* in favor of the institution of kingship as a military necessity. pro-monarchical tradition which use the term *nāgîd* and speak in terms of kingship as a divine grant of an eternal dynasty to the house of David is found in 2 Samuel 7.

The deuteronomic historians craft these opposing traditions into their narratives of Judges and the books of Samuel. The argument of the pro-monarchy tradition becomes stronger in the book of First Samuel. It is Yahweh who chooses the first two kings “by prophetic designation”<sup>67</sup>. In the case of Saul, Yahweh instructs Samuel to anoint Saul:

Now the day before Saul came, the Lord had revealed the following to Samuel: “At this time tomorrow, I will send a man to you from the territory of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him ruler of My people Israel. He will deliver My people from the hands of the Philistines; for I have taken note of My people, their outcry has come to Me.” As soon as Samuel saw Saul, the LORD declared to him, “This is the man that I told you would govern My people.” (1 Samuel 9: 15-17). Samuel took a flask of oil and poured some on Saul’s head and kissed him, and said, “The Lord herewith anoints you ruler (*lā-nā-gîd*) over His own people (1 Samuel 10:1).

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<sup>65</sup> Patrick V. Reid, “The Origin of the Monarchy in Israel,” *The Bible Today* 63 (1973), 1178

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 1179

<sup>67</sup> Hoppe, Leslie J. “The Strategy of the Deuteronomistic History: A Proposal.” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (January 2017): 1-19. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed August 7, 2017).



In the instruction for the initial anointing of Saul, we notice that the term used is *nāgîd* and not *melek*.

After the rejection of Saul, Yahweh instructs Samuel to go and anoint David in his place. This tradition uses the term *melek* (*king*).

And the Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him as king" (*melek*) over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and set out; I am sending you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have decided on one of his sons to be king "*melek*" (1 Samuel 16:1).

Leslie Hoppe highlights another tradition which presents the centerpiece of the Deuteronomistic story of the monarchy as is Nathan's oracle regarding the promise of an eternal dynasty to David (2 Sam 7:16).<sup>68</sup>

In opposition to the pro-monarchical strain, the anti-monarchical tradition stresses the point that Yahweh was the only king of Israel and no one can usurp his position. The deuteronomic authors craft this position in Judges, First Samuel, and Second Samuel. The book of Judges records the first attempt at establishing a kingdom during the time of Gideon. Due to his charismatic leadership which witnessed huge success against the nomadic raids and also because of his successful intervention in the Midianite crises, and due at large to the increasing threats from the Philistines, the Israelites offered to make Gideon king who will rule over them: "Rule over us--you, your son and your grandson--because you have saved us from the hand of Midian" (Judges 8:22-13). Bernhard Anderson suggests that "they proposed to change the basis of his authority from that of nonhereditary, charismatic judgeship to that of a hereditary monarchy modeled after the kingdoms of the Transjordan, notably Moab and Ammon."<sup>69</sup> Gideon gives an answer that was consistent with the foundations of Israelite theocracy: "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you" (Judges 8:23). Gideon is aware that Yahweh alone was Israel's king and he was not ready to usurp such position. The rejection of the monarchy in Gideon's refusal to rule

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>69</sup> Anderson, Bernhard W. *Understanding the Old Testament*. Upper Saddle River, (N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007) 203.

over the people and his pointing to Yahweh as the only ruler anticipates the debate about the monarchy in the book of Samuel where monarchy is fully introduced.<sup>70</sup> Although Abimelech his son *bulldozes* his way to the quasi monarchy, he does not last; he is killed three years later (Judg. 9:1-57).

The interpretation of the people's demand for a king that God gives Samuel is reminiscent of Gideon's response to the people. The establishment of the monarchy is a rejection of Yahweh. By choosing a human leader, the people were rejecting God as their only king. Samuel himself opposes the idea of the establishment of the monarchy and views this as a gross disregard of the theocracy that they practiced, hence a sinful rejection of God and a form of idolatry. In his prayer to God after the request of a king, Samuel cried to the Lord who commands Samuel to listen to the people:

Heed the demand of the people in everything they say to you. For it is not you that they have rejected; it is Me they have rejected as their king. Like everything else they have done ever since I brought them out of Egypt to this day-forsaking Me and worshiping other gods-so they are doing to you. Heed their demand; but warn them solemnly, and tell them about the practices of any king who will rule over them (1 Samuel 8: 7-8).

Moreover, following the Lord's direction Samuel cautions the people about their choice and describes the devastating aftermath of such demand:

This will be the practice of the king who will rule over you: He will **take** your sons and appoint them as his charioteers and horsemen, and they will serve as outrunners for his chariots. He will appoint them as his chiefs of thousands and of fifties; or they will have to plow his fields, reap his harvest, and make his weapons and the equipment for his chariots. He will **take** your daughters as perfumers, cooks, and bakers. He will seize your choice fields, vineyards, and olive groves, and give them to his courtiers. He will **take** a tenth part of your grain and vintage and give it to his eunuchs and courtiers. He will **take** your male and female slaves, your choice young men, and your asses, and put them to work for him. He will **take** a tenth part of your flocks, and you shall become his slaves. The day will come when you cry out because of the king whom you yourselves have chosen; and the Lord will not answer you on that day. (1Sam 8:11-18).

Although the desire for a king seems to go against the theocracy that the Lord established at Sinai (Ex. 19-24), it is evident that the political circumstances during the era of Judges, leading up to the monarchy became a strong motivation for a king, or one who would organize and lead a more formidable military might that would withstand the onslaught of the

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<sup>70</sup> Coogan, Michael David. *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in Its Context*, 191.

external enemies (1 Sam 8:20). The people are convinced that their confederated tribes are inadequate in combating these threats. They are also unsatisfied with the kind of non-militarized leadership provided by Samuel and his sons, who like the sons of Eli, deviate from the ways of their father by corrupting justice in taking bribes (1 Samuel 8: 3). The first book of Samuel captures this initial struggle in Israel's formation of a kingdom. It also provides a description of the transition from the time of the Judges to a monarchic system. It showcases the early challenges that Israel faces within this foundational period.

However, long before the people demanded a king, Hannah makes a great move towards deliverance from anarchy to monarchy. She is the link from the time of Judges to the monarchy since it is her son, Samuel, who will preside over Israel's transition to the monarchy, and will anoint the first two kings of Israel (1 Sam 10:1; 16:13). Bernhard W. Anderson maintains that "Samuel was "unquestionably the greatest spiritual leader of Israel since the time of Moses. His career marked the transition from the old type of charismatic leadership to the new prophetic leadership which, from this time on, played an outstanding role in Israel's life. Under his spiritual guidance, Israel made the shift from the politically inadequate Tribal confederacy to the more stable government of the monarchy".<sup>71</sup>

### **Hannah and Samuel, the Road to the Monarchy**

Hannah is introduced in the Bible as the wife of Elkanah. Although she is the favorite of the two wives of Elkanah, she is childless like the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel:

There was a man from Ramathaim of the Zuphites, in the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. He had two wives: one named Hannah and the other Peninnah; Peninnah had children, but Hannah was childless. (1 Sam 1:1-2)

The name Hannah is related to and evokes the common word "ḥen", or ("favour").<sup>72</sup> It could also mean "grace/gracious".<sup>73</sup> It is not surprising then that as the narrative continues God

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<sup>71</sup> Anderson, Bernhard W. *Understanding the Old Testament*, 206

<sup>72</sup> Dunn, James D. G., and J. W. Rogerson. *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 214

bestows his favors on Hannah by giving her children (1 Sam 2:21). She is also named as one of the seven prophetesses in the Talmud.<sup>74</sup> Indeed Hannah is not just favored by God, she becomes a source of favor for Israel. As in the barren-mother stories of the patriarchal period Israel, through Hannah, Israel experiences a major turning point in their history.

The story of Hannah fits into the barren mother type narrative. Even a casual reader of the Old Testament cannot miss the echo of the Abraham-Sarah saga in the Hannah's narrative. She joins numerous other women who are considered barren and who give birth through divine intervention. In many of these cases, the children born to these mothers become great figures in Israel. The roles played by these women, Sarah (Gen 11:29-30); Rebekah (Gen 25:20-34; 26:34-27:45), Rachel (Gen 29:15-30:24), and the unnamed mother of Samson (Judges 13:1-24) have already been considered in the previous chapter. Using the motif of formerly barren women who become mothers of great national leaders or ancestors, the book of First Samuel carefully lays out the crucial role of Hannah. In many of the examples mentioned above, the barren women take great and even bizarre steps to ensure the success of their children. Sarah resorts to jealousy (Gen 16: 5ff, 21) and the maltreatment of her rival (Gen 21:9-12). In the case of Rebekah, she resorts to deception (Gen 27:6-17). Hannah, however, never challenges her rival nor does she engage the children of her rival (1 Sam 1:6). Rather, she makes her case before God.

Because of her great faith in God, Hannah stands in line with those who influenced the course of history. By taking matters into her own hands, she ventures to influence the divine plan. Unlike Rachel who confronts her husband about her barrenness (Gen 30:1) or Rebekah who is silent about her barrenness and whose husband makes her case known to God (Gen 25:21), and unlike Sarah who is willing to live with the situation of her barrenness by

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<sup>73</sup> Youngblood, Ronald, "Hannah" in David Noel Freedman (ed in chief): *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol 3, (London: Doubleday, 1992), 52.

<sup>74</sup> The New Catholic Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol 5 (15<sup>th</sup> ed): Micropaedia Ready Reference, (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 2007), 683.

making alternative arrangement (Gen 16:1-4), Hannah knows exactly the right decision. She confronts God in an emotion-packed prayer stated as a vow:

O Lord of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head. (1 Sam 1:11).

Hannah is a wise and strong-willed woman who is not afraid to bargain with God. She, as it were, convinces God that he will also benefit from the favor she is asking of him. In other words, she assures God that he also has a stake in the deal by promising to consecrate her son to God after weaning him. Her promise to God, “I will dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life” (1 Sam 1:11) results in the birth of Samuel who brings about the reform of the priesthood, and the birth of Israelite monarchy.<sup>75</sup> Samuel will also bring about the revival of prophecy in Israel (1 Sam 3:1, 20). However, it is not only Hannah and God who benefit from the gift of her son. Hannah’s story is not solely her story; it is also the story of Israel.

In a way, Hannah’s narrative is expressive of the larger story of Israel. Her predicaments significantly mirror the larger problem of Israel. R. Polzin recognizes that Hannah’s request for a son bears a symbolic relationship to Israel’s request for a king.<sup>76</sup> Again, Christopher Jero affirms that “the Hannah narrative is meant to introduce the story of Israel’s kingdom in Samuel-Kings by providing a typological representation of Israel’s request for a king.”<sup>77</sup> Just as Hannah is barren, Israel is barren of genuine leadership and direction. Hannah wants a child; Israel wants a king. Hannah’s rival has many children, Israel’s surrounding enemies have kings. Hannah’s rival harasses her; the Philistines harass Israel (1 Sam 4-7). Hannah’s husband loves her uniquely and gives her a special portion, Israel is loved by God (1 Sam 2:29). Hannah receives what she “asked for” when she conceives

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<sup>75</sup> Cook, Joan E. *Hannah's Desire, God's Design: Early Interpretations of the Story of Hannah*, 21

<sup>76</sup> Jero, Christopher “Mother-Child Narratives and the Kingdom of God: Authorial Use of Typology as an Interpretive Device in Samuel-Kings.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 25.2 (2015):157

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 157

Samuel, and Israel also receives what they asked for, Saul, their first king.<sup>78</sup>

This is the period after the Judges, and Eli who is the most visible leader at this time, represents a society that is on the verge of collapse. Eli is both old and blind, and his children, far from being shining lights to those who came to offer sacrifices, are corrupt and scandalous (1 Sam 2:12-17). Since they are the very ones to bear the torch of leadership after their father, their attitude clearly demonstrates that the leadership of Israel is heading for great turbulence. Unfortunately, on the external front, Israel is being pummeled by her enemies, especially by the Philistines (1 Samuel 4-7).

### **Hannah the Woman of Prayer**

In Hannah, we see a woman of prayer whose trust in God brings blessings not only to her, but to the whole of Israel. Despite the challenges of barrenness, exacerbated by the daily taunts from her “co-wife” Penninah (I Sam 1:7), Hannah excels as one of the great women of faith in the Old Testament. Rather than confront her opponent, she puts her absolute trust in God. Even when her prayer to God is misunderstood by Eli, the priest, as drunkenness, she does not respond negatively but simply explains her conditions and professes her trust in God’s intervention (1 Sam 1:9-13). Indeed we can say that her story is one of triumph of

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<sup>78</sup> It may be important to point out at this juncture that many scholars maintain that the thematic use of the verb שָׁאַל (šā-’āl) in 1 Samuel 1:28 indicates that Saul, not Samuel, is the child whom Hannah is to bear. Some scholars argue that the root “šā-’al” (ask) is used in a kind of word play. Although this may not be far removed from the word שְׂמַעְלָא (semu’el), it is without doubt more reminiscent of Saul, “he who is asked for” (Hertzberg, Hans Wilhelm, and John Bowden. I & [and] II Samuel: A Commentary. London: SCM Press, 1986. 26). In view of this, Ivar Hylanders has sought to establish that the story originally described the birth of Saul, who like Samson, is regarded as a deliver from the Philistine oppression (Ibid, 25-26). Kyle P. McCarter suggests that “Samuel’s birth narrative may have absorbed elements from another account describing Saul’s birth (McCarter, P. Kyle. I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2010, 62.). Others posit however that: it is impossible to establish that the original literary form of this passage was a narrative connected with the birth of Saul. It is, however, quite conceivable that such a narrative about the longed-for Saul, the future deliverer from the Philistines, was current in the pre-literary period; more than we can say. If this material then attached itself to the figure of Samuel, the reason was surely not just a similarity in the names (though this made the process easier), but the fact that Samuel, to a greater degree than Saul, became and continued to be the formative figure, in other words the man sent of God (Ibid, 25-26). While some scholars see a textual confusion between two main figures, Samuel and Saul, in the book of Samuel, others “find the resulting connection as interesting and profound” (Fox, Everett. Give Us a King!: Samuel, Saul, and David : a New Translation of Samuel I and II. New York: Schocken Books, 1999. 9). Robert Alter suggests that Hannah may have employed a play on two Hebrew words, *sha’ul* and *me’el*, “asked of God” (Alter, Robert. The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000, 6). Saul is asked for, in rejection of God (1 Sam 8:7), Samuel is asked for to serve God (1 Sam 1:11). While recognizing this analysis of the book of Samuel, the focus of this work is on Hannah and how she turns the tide in Israel through her decision to dedicate her son to God and also largely through Samuel whom the biblical narrative names as her son.

patience and piety in the face of agony. She is convinced beyond every reasonable doubt that God is a solace for a grief-stricken soul.<sup>79</sup> Although she is childless, she is aware that she is neither powerless nor *prayerless*. Her patience and endurance pay off at the appointed time when God grants her heart's desire with the gift of a son, Samuel: "It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him שְׁמוּאֵל saying, "Because I have asked him of the LORD" (1 Sam 1:20 NASB).

Edith Deen captures succinctly this uniqueness of Hannah when she observes:

Hannah was the fourth great woman in sacred history who grieved because she had not conceived, and among the four she was the most prayerful. Sarah had laughed when she learned a child would be born to her in old age. Rebekah bore her trial with listlessness and indifference. Rachael, irritated at her long wait for a child, exclaimed, "Give me children, or else I die." Hannah sought her call as a mother in the power of God, for she desired a son as a poet desires a song.<sup>80</sup>

By taking her case to God in the temple without an intermediary, Hannah stands as evidence that in ancient Israel women were not restricted from approaching God in the temple. Hannah is actively involved in the religious life of her time. This gives credence to the claim that "The revealed religion of the Bible opened the door of the tabernacle to women to take part in the worship of God and declared them mature and free to take practical, active part in religion."<sup>81</sup> But over and above the simple fulfillment of religious duties, Hannah's action also reflects the depth of her relationship with God. She joins the litany of other women who speak with God, such as Rebekah who consults with God about the children in her womb (Gen 25:22-23), and Samson's mother who is visited by an angel (Judg 13:3, 5). While in the case of Samson's mother, the angel gives her specific instructions about the child, (Judges 13:4-5), it is Hannah who makes the nazirite vow on her own accord (1 Samuel 1:11). It is also important to note that just in the same way that Samson delivers Israel from the Philistines (Judg 13:4), Samuel also delivers Israel from the Philistines (1 Sam 7).

<sup>79</sup> Catlin, Warren B. *The Progress of Economics A History of Economic Thought*. (New York: Bookman Associates, 1962), 163. <<http://books.google.com/books?id=eEBEAAAIAAJ>>. accessed June 5th, 2017

<sup>80</sup> Deen, Edith. *All of the Women of the Bible*. (New York: Harper, 1955), 89.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas, Metta N. *Women of the Bible: A Study in Their Life and Character*. (Nashville: Christian Family Books, 1956), 68.

Although one can argue that Hannah's request for a son is based on a personal quest to satisfy her duty as a wife, her promise to place this child in God's service transcends personal interest. Her sacrifice places her and her son at a turning point in salvation history of the people of Israel. In this regard, Hannah becomes a mother who nurtures Israel from anarchy to the monarchy.

The narrative also indicates that not only does Hannah make a vow to God about the child, she is the one who dedicates him to God. She also shows that she is in charge of the situation when she declines to follow her husband to the temple until the child is weaned (1 Sam 1:21-22). It is worthy of note that Hannah is responsible in deciding what the life-mission of her son is. Even before the birth of Samuel, she promises to dedicate him to God:

Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head (1 Sam 1:11).

Because this decision is in line with God's plan, her husband, Elkanah gives her all the support she needs in this regard: "That Elkanah accepts that the first son of his preferred wife will leave the family and live in the temple indicates the authority she has in the house and also no doubt the depth of his love for her."<sup>82</sup>

From the foregoing, we see how Hannah at this period is a major character in the religious life of Israel and an agent of change in the temple, especially with the contrasting story of the declining Eli's household. Yet, it is ironic that while the out-of-touch priest and his household are decadent and waning in influence, the very righteous woman who is to instrumentally transform the priesthood is seen as drunk:

As she kept praying before the Lord, Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? 'Sober up!'" And Hannah replied, "Oh no, my Lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to the Lord. Do not

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<sup>82</sup> Esler, Philip Francis. *Sex, Wives, and Warriors Reading Old Testament Narrative with Its Ancient Audience*. (Cambridge, U.K.: James Clarke, 2012), 131.



take your maidservant for a worthless woman; I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and distress" (1 Sam 1:12-16).

God's answer to Hannah's prayers is also a direct answer to the need of the people of Israel. Samuel, the son of Hannah, eventually emerges as the most visible leader in Israel and serves as a direct link between the people and God as judge (1 Sam 7:15), prophet (1 Sam 3:20) and priest (1 Sam 7: 9). By giving her child to God, Hannah gives a great gift to the people of Israel. God's blessing on Hannah is a blessing on the people. In fact, God's blessing on Hannah is a symbol of his love and care for the people of Israel. Through Hannah, Israel will be restored.

Hannah's influence in the life of her son and the whole land of Israel begins almost immediately after his birth. Hannah, just like several other women of the Old Testament which we examined in the second chapter names her son: "So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the LORD for him" (1 Sam 1:20). After weaning the child, it is Hannah who presents him in the temple (1 Sam 1:24). Although Elkanah, Hannah's husband, is mentioned as being part of this ceremony, he seems to play a very passive role here and in Samuel's early life. Hannah's contribution to the history of Israel's monarchy is primarily through her son who becomes a great prophet who anoints the kings, Saul and David who will confront the threats of the Philistines.

### **Hannah's Poem, a Prelude to Israel's Monarchy**

The poetic thanksgiving prayer of Hannah gives theological direction to the entire book of Samuel and sets the stage for Israel's monarchy. Some scholars maintain that the song of Hannah is strategically placed by the Deuteronomist authors to function as the theme of the books of Samuel. Barry L. Bandstra, for instance, argues that "Often in works of literature and theology the controlling theme starts early in the work, and later stories develop that theme. Hannah's song, as this prayer has come to be called, voices a theme that resounds

through the books of Samuel.”<sup>83</sup> Other scholars argue that Hannah’s poem is a later insertion into Hannah’s narrative and as such, secondary, especially because some of the details do not correspond with Hannah’s narrative. The reference to a king in the poem (2 Sam 2:10), for instance, is thought to be anachronistic, given that there was no king in Israel at this time.

Notwithstanding the above claim that some elements of the song appear to be more developed than the Hannah narrative there are certain themes in the prayer of Hannah that aptly capture her situation and provide an interpretative key to the monarchic period as recorded in the books of Samuel. One of those elements is the theme of reversal which is very much appropriate for Hannah’s narrative. In 1 Samuel 2:5, there is a complete reversal of the status quo:

Men once sated must hire out for bread;  
Men once hungry hunger no more.  
While the barren woman bears seven,  
The mother of many is forlorn.

This fits into the Hannah-Peninah narrative in as much as Hannah, the childless wife, has had a child. In addition to Samuel, she has five more children (1 Sam 2:21). Hannah is therefore vindicated over her rival, Peninah. This could also refer to the switch of roles between Eli and his sons on the one hand, and Hannah and her son on the other. Eli and his sons must now give way to Hannah and her son Samuel: “Eli’s sons were scoundrels; they paid no heed to the Lord...they ignored their father’s pleas; for the lord was resolved that they should die. Young Samuel, meanwhile grew in esteem and favor both with God and with men” (1 Sam 2:12, 25b-26) Looking a little further into the David-Saul story (1 Sam 16-31), the theme of reversal in Hannah’s poem could also point to Saul giving way to David as the king of Israel. Again, the proud Goliath who is feared by all and who has been a fighter from his youth is defeated by little David who has never had any fighting experience (1 Sam 17:1-58).

When Hannah says for instance, that the bows of the mighty are shattered, this could

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<sup>83</sup> Bandstra, Barry L. *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/ Cengage Learning, 2009), 257.

apply to the utterances of Peninah. The Book of Psalms compares the tongue with swords and the words from an enemy as arrows:

Hide me from a band of evil men,  
From a crowd of evildoers,  
Who whet their tongues like swords;  
They aim their arrows –cruel words –  
To shoot from hiding at the blameless man;  
They shoot him suddenly and without fear (Ps 64:3)

The “bows of the mighty being shattered” could also refer even more fittingly to the story of David and Goliath or even the Philistines as a whole (1 Sam 17:48-58). In the David and Goliath story, one cannot but see the contrast between David, the amateur fighter and the heavily armed Philistine giant:

A champion of the Philistine forces stepped forward; his name was Goliath of Gath, and he was six cubits and a span tall. He had a bronze helmet on his head, and wore a breastplate of scale armor, a bronze breastplate weighing five thousand shekels. He had bronze greaves on his legs, and a bronze javelin (slung) from his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver’s bar, and the iron head of his spear weighed six hundred shekels; and the shield-bearer marched in front of him (1Sam 17:4-7).

With the above resumé, it is no surprise that Goliath was appalled at the sight of the shepherd boy featured by the Israelites as their champion. In his last speech before the battle he mocks David saying to him:

Am I a dog that you come against me with sticks? The Philistine cursed David by his gods; and the Philistine said to David “come here and I will give your flesh to the birds of the sky and the beast of the field” (1 Sam 17:43-44).

David, on the other hand, simply “took his staff, picked a few smooth stones from the wadi, put them in the pocket of his shepherd’s bag and, sling in hand, he went toward the Philistine” (1Sam 17:40). Even though David did not have any elaborate resumé to flaunt he knew that God was with him. And so with deafening courage he challenges the Philistine champion saying:

You come against me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come against you in the name of the Lord of Host, the God of the ranks of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hands. I will kill you and cut off your head; and I will give the carcasses of the Philistine camp to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth. All the earth shall know that there is a God in Israel. And this whole assembly shall know that the lord can give victory without sword or spear. For the battle is the Lord’s and he will deliver you into our hands” (1 Sam 17:45-47).

David was indeed very confident, and God delivered Goliath into his hands:

Thus David bested the Philistine with sling and stone; he struck him down and killed him. David had no sword; so David ran up and stood over the Philistine, grasped his sword and pulled it from its sheath; and with it he dispatched him and cut off his head. When the Philistines saw that their warrior was dead, they ran. The men of Israel and Judah rose up with a war cry and they pursued the Philistines all the way to Gai and up the gates of Ekron; the Philistines fell mortally wounded along the road to Shaarim up to Gath and Ekron (1 Sam 17:48-54).

It is very unlikely that the reader of 1 Samuel, hearing Hannah's Song does not immediately think of God's deliverance of the people of Israel from the Philistines who had become dreaded enemies of the Israelites. The song of Hannah, while addressing her immediate situation fits very concretely the situation of Israel under the dominion of the Philistines.

Hannah attributes everything to God who is more powerful than all, especially her enemies. He is responsible for death and life. Hannah is aware of this, and the narrative in Samuel makes it clear that even in Hannah's situation it is God who had closed her womb (1 Sam 1:6). She is able to conceive only when God remembers her (1 Sam 1:19). Translating this into the life of Israel, it is clear that Hannah's song assures the Israelites that God remembers them, just in the same way that he remembers Hannah. Hence, there is victory:

The foes of the LORD shall be shattered;  
He will thunder against them in the heavens.  
The Lord will judge the ends of the earth.  
He will give power to His king,  
And triumph to His anointed one (1Sam 2:10).

Joan E Cook makes the point that "The song of Hannah states the new direction to come in Israel's fortunes with the establishment of messianic kingship, which finally demonstrates divine kingship."<sup>84</sup> Hannah without a doubt turns the tide in the right direction by being "the catalyst for reform of the priesthood and creation of the monarchy."<sup>85</sup> At a time when Israel is bereft of genuine guidance, Hannah steps in and inspires hope. It is not unlikely that Hannah herself would have experienced the decadence of the priesthood of Eli as exemplified by his sons. Eli's inability to understand Hannah's plight and prayer (1 Sam

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<sup>84</sup> Cook, Joan E. *Hannah's Desire, God's Design: Early Interpretations of the Story of Hannah*, 34.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

1:13) and his inaccurate diagnosis of the situation, interpreting Hannah's intense spiritual discourse as a manifestation of drunkenness apparently indicates he has lost touch with the true state of affairs in Israel. He is unable to immediately discern God's direction (1 Sam 2:27-29).

Again, we see her selflessness. She subordinates her happiness by forfeiting the joy of her son whom she offered in the temple to bring the change that is desired and needed at the time of crises. Rather than sit down and lament over her predicament and the larger problem of Israel, Hannah decides to stand and lift her hands to God. What began as a story of a barren woman wanting a son concludes as a story of a powerful woman who changes the course of events for the better, not just for herself and her household, but for Israel as a whole. At the time of Israel's defeat and confusion, God sends a deliverer for them through the supplication of a woman. Hannah emerges from her misery and becomes the source of light and new direction to Israel. As one whose name means "favor," she indeed becomes a recipient of God's favor. The story of Israel's monarchy cannot be complete without the life and person of Samuel and the story of Samuel cannot begin or be complete without Hannah.

## Chapter Four

### Abigail, the Wise Woman who leads to David's Kingship

The final poem in the book of Proverbs asks: "Who can find a woman of worth" (Proverbs 31: 10-31 NAB)? Even though it goes ahead to provide the answer, it would also be true to say: "Anyone who reads 1 Sam 25:2-41." Abigail fits Proverb's description of the perfect woman above. She is wise, industrious, prudent, sensitive, beautiful, independent and assertive. Abigail is a unique personality in the monarchical era, and instrumental in David's rise to power.

The story of Abigail is one of the most fascinating stories about women and their positive influence in the Old Testament. However, not many readers of the Bible are familiar with her story. A cursory glance at Abigail may seem to present her as a footnote to the David story, but a deeper look into her personality reveals her as a central actress in the narrative. She was one of the most important characters in the life of David and definitely the leading protagonist in the 1 Samuel 25 story. Adele Berlin captures Abigail's primordial role when she notes that in the Abigail-David story (1 Sam 25) actions take place in the home of Abigail and shifts to David's location only when Abigail is there.<sup>86</sup> David therefore, is only the supporting actor.

#### Who is Abigail?

The Hebrew name אַבְיָגַיִל means "father rejoices"<sup>87</sup> or "father's joy". Abigail is described as "intelligent and beautiful" (1 Sam 25:3). Ken Mulzac observes that in the Hebrew Bible, the term "intelligent or good understanding" is rarely used in relation to a woman.<sup>88</sup> That Abigail is described thus is an indication of her exceptional significance in the narrative.

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<sup>86</sup> Berlin, Adele. "Characterization in Biblical Narrative: David's wives." *Journal For The Study Of The Old Testament* 7, no. 23 (1982): 69-85. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed May 2, 2017).

<sup>87</sup> McKenzie, John L. *Dictionary of the Bible*, 2.

<sup>88</sup> Ken Mulzac. "The role of Abigail in 1 Samuel 2.5" *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 45-53.

Phyllis Bird describes her as "intelligent, beautiful, discreet and loyal to her husband (despite his stupidity and boorish character). Prudent, quick-witted, and resourceful, she is capable of independent action."<sup>89</sup> Abigail is married to a wealthy man described as harsh and unruly (1 Sam 25:2). The name “nā-bāl” itself could mean foolish, churlish.<sup>90</sup> Hence, while Abigail stands for intelligence and wisdom, her husband represents the proverbial fool. At the onset of this narrative, the author of 1 Samuel clearly contrasts the personalities of Abigail and Nabal. Jon D Levenson adds that “the Hebrew word *nabal* indicates more than a harmless simpleton, but rather a vicious, materialistic, and egocentric misfit.”<sup>91</sup> In the narrative, Abigail is evidently valued more than her husband. Given the general notion that the Old Testament world is predominantly patriarchal, it is striking that Abigail is very clearly portrayed as having superior understanding to her husband. In fact, in this narrative she plays a more central role than even David.

However, scholars are divided over the personality of Abigail. While some see her as wise and prudent, others cast a more ambivalent light on her personality arguing that she could be an opportunist who has no qualms siding with David who at this time was a stranger, instead of her husband (1 Sam 25:25). She also calls her husband “fool” in the presence of an enemy. Her request that David should remember her when the Lord makes him prince over Israel could also point to an ulterior selfish interest in David (1 Sam 25:31). Alice Bach adds that along with calling her husband fool and siding with the enemy, she does not mourn the death of her husband.<sup>92</sup> Conversely, Judette Gallares gives a more positive and contemporary interpretation to Abigail’s initiative in which she describes her as “a faithful pacifist, an advocate of active non-violence and peace, who offers us an alternative value

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<sup>89</sup> Phyllis Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), 65.

<sup>90</sup> Gehman, Henry Snyder (ed.) *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, 645

<sup>91</sup> Levenson, Jon D. "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40, (1978): 13. Old Testament Abstracts, EBSCOhost (accessed May 24, 2017).

<sup>92</sup> Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob. *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 87

system, another set of ideals, another approach to leadership that relies more on the power of peace and reconciliation than on the power of hate and vengeance.”<sup>93</sup>

No matter the position one takes about Abigail’s character, what is very obvious is that she is wise and strong-willed. It is clear that she not only manages her household affairs, but also commands the loyalty of the servants. She is independent and displays great confidence. Amy Smith Carman notes that she is “brave enough to ride out from the closed security of her home to face the storms of her husband’s enemy.”<sup>94</sup> We see in Abigail a woman of courage and determination who is not afraid to take initiatives and make decisions. Like Hannah who goes to the temple to make her vow to God without informing her husband (1 Sam 1:9-14), Abigail goes to meet David without informing her husband, Nabal. Her decision not to inform her husband about her task is an intelligent move since her husband would have prevented her from carrying out that salvific gesture. She understands her husband’s shortcomings and is willing to supply for his inadequacies.

### **The Background of the Abigail Story**

Abigail lived at a time of great turbulence in Israel. There was internal tension and rivalry between Saul and David. Saul had lost his divine mandate (1 Sam 15:23; 16:1) and David who had been chosen to be king was wanderer and a fugitive. To further exacerbate the situation, Samuel who was the prophetic voice and the king maker had just died (1 Sam 25:1). The story of Abigail is bracketed by the events of 1 Samuel 24 and 26 in which David, who has the opportunity to eliminate his rival Saul, spares his life even when his servants advised him to do otherwise. He triumphs over Saul, his opponent, without the need to kill him himself.

The Abigail story, therefore, functions within the larger picture of Israel’s monarchy as a strong endorsement of David's destiny to reign as the chosen favorite of God without the

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 87

<sup>94</sup> Carman, Amy Smith. "Abigail: The Wise Woman of Carmel." *Stone-Campbell Journal* 18, no. 1 (2015): 56 ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed April 29, 2017).



bloodshed of personal revenge. This is evident in the two Saul stories mentioned above.

Abigail is presented as the sagacious woman who is the unexpected savior of the future king of Israel.<sup>95</sup>

The role of Abigail comes to the fore in her mediatory role between her husband Nabal and David who is in hiding from King Saul. It is shearing season and Nabal, a wealthy land owner who has thousands of goats and sheep is doing the shearing of his sheep (1 Sam 25:2). David and his men who have dwelt in the neighborhood for some time and have used their military might to protect Nabal's property from plunderers (1 Sam 25:15-16) are low on supplies and want Nabal to assist them with supplies of any kind (1 Sam 25:6-8), probably as a kind of "security fee". Rather than reciprocate David's kind gesture and share his produce with him, Nabal dismisses and insults him with his uncouth words. The glaring contrast between the kindhearted and appealing request of David and the appalling reply of Nabal shows his impulsive personality. David simply said to him through his servants:

Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have. I hear that you have shearers. Now your shepherds have been with us, and we did them no harm, and they missed nothing all the time they were in Carmel. Ask your young men, and they will tell you. Therefore let my young men find favor in your eyes, for we come on a feast day. Please give whatever you have at hand to your servants and to your son David (1 Sam 25:6-8 ESV).

It is very striking that even though David comes with peace and in fact the term **שָׁלוֹם**

"Peace" appears three times in his speech, Nabal chooses to be boorish. To David's plea he responds:

Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many slaves nowadays who run away from their masters. Should I then take my bread and my water, and the meat that I slaughtered for my own shearers, and give them to men who come from I don't know where" (1 Sam 25:10-11)?

The book of Proverbs states that "the mouths of fools are their undoing, and their lips are a snare to their very lives (Proverbs 18:7). This is very true of Nabal. His churlish approach to David will become his undoing. His reply enrages David who makes a vow to avenge himself

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 77

by wiping out all the males in Nabal's household: "May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him" (1 Sam 25: 22).

Nabal's servants, who were not unfamiliar with this kind of attitude from their master take matters into their own hands, and, without wasting much time approach Abigail to inform her of the impending doom. She takes a bold step to assuage David in order to save the life of her husband and the entire family (1 Sam 25:14-29). She is successful in her negotiation and David is appeased. The wrath of God befalls Nabal who dies ten days later, and David marries Abigail (1 Sam 25:36-40).

### **Abigail and Her Wise Counsel to David**

The well-crafted speech which Abigail delivers kneeling at the feet of David captures quite aptly her intelligence and her charm of character:

Let the blame be mine, my lord, but let your handmaid speak to you; hear your maid's plea. Please, my lord, pay no attention to that wretched fellow Nabal. For he is just what his name says: His name means 'boor' and he is a boor. Your maidservant did not see the young men whom my lord sent. I swear, my lord, as the Lord lives and as you live – the Lord who has kept you from seeking redress by blood with your own hands – let your enemies and all who would harm my lord fare like Nabal! Here is the present which your maidservant has brought to my lord; let it be given to the young men who are the followers of my lord. Please pardon your maid's boldness. For the Lord will grant my lord an enduring house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord, and no wrong is ever found in you. And if anyone sets out to pursue you and seek your life, the life of my lord will be bound up in the bundle of life in the care of the Lord; but He will fling away the lives of your enemies as from the hollow of a sling. And when the Lord has accomplished for my lord all the good He has promised you, and has appointed you ruler (*nāgîd*) of Israel, do not let this be a cause of stumbling and of faltering courage to my Lord that you have shed blood needlessly and that my lord sought redress with his own hands. And when the Lord has prospered my lord, remember your maid (1 Sam 25:23-31).

Even before Abigail commences her speech, she bows before David with her face to the ground and kneels at his feet (1 Sam 25:23-24). While this obviously indicates a sign of total submission to David and an acknowledgment of his authority over her, it may have also been intended as a disarming tool. No man, no matter how outraged, would not be moved with pity when faced with such perceived feminine powerlessness. Ironically, while displaying powerlessness, she actually exerts a powerful influence on David.

Abigail's speech is a great rhetorical masterpiece carefully worded and schemed out for immediate transformative impact on David. First, she disarms David by pointing out Nabal's insensibility and taking responsibility for his foolish action. She recognizes her husband's mistakes, distances herself from them and also gives legitimacy to David's anger: "Please, my lord, pay no attention to that wretched fellow Nabal. For he is just what his name says: His name means 'boor' and he is a boor. Your maidservant did not see the young men whom my lord sent" (1 Sam 25:25). While conceding that Nabal's action is wrong, she concomitantly intercedes on his behalf. Then, she proceeds to appeal to David's conscience and moral rectitude, outlining for him the disastrous consequences of rashness. By taking responsibility for the guilt of her husband and asking David to take vengeance on her, Abigail makes a clever move to save Nabal's life. Abigail is aware that David would not do such. She therefore, effectively corners Nabal as it were, behind the curtain and stands as a wall between him and David. Although David still feels the rage towards Nabal and can imagine all the evil he had schemed against his household, the presence of Abigail makes it impossible for David to reach Nabal. All he sees is Abigail and not Nabal. All he can now feel is the pristine feminine charm of Abigail, garnished with unequaled sagacity and not the crude outburst of Nabal; David can only hear the emollient voice of a wise woman and not the truculent outburst of a foolish man. Abigail's exaggerated courtesy, wherein she calls David "my lord" eleven times, is meant to counter the boorishness of her husband Nabal while, at the same time, *massaging David's ego*.

To imagine that Abigail's speech was a spontaneous response to the servants' report about David's murderous intent indicates Abigail's wisdom. To cap her argument, she presents David with gifts of two hundred loaves, two skins of wine, five sheep already prepared, five seahs of parched grain, a hundred clusters of raisins and two hundred cakes of figs (1 Samuel 25:18). Her choice of gifts also shows a mark of perceptiveness and

attentiveness to the situation. They were not random gifts but gifts carefully selected to address the immediate needs of David and his men at that existential moment. Yet, as Levenson argues, it “is also essential that Abigail neither appears to be bribing David, lest she injure the warrior’s pride, nor come empty-handed, lest she seem to underestimate the man’s resolve and the seriousness with which he takes the matter.”<sup>96</sup> She plays the role of an intercessor by pleading for mercy on behalf of her husband and the entire household. This is reminiscent of the intermediary role played by Moses on behalf of the people who had sinned against God on Mount Sinai (Ex 32: 11-14; cf, Numbers 14; Deuteronomy 9:13-14) or Abraham haggling with the Lord who was marching to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:16-33). Abigail is indeed an intercessor and a savior not just for David but also for her family.

The effectiveness of her speech is seen in her ability to change the heart of David. The narrative does not in any way suggest that her beauty or femininity was responsible for David’s change of heart. Her wisdom is responsible for this metanoia. Affirmatively, David acknowledges:

Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from working salvation with my own hand! For as surely as the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there had not been left to Nabal so much as one male. (1 Sam 25:32-34 ESV)

Ellen G. White perfectly articulates Abigail’s intervention as divinely inspired: “Her speech, seasoned with grace, and full of kindness and peace, shed a heavenly influence. Better impulses came to David, and he trembled as he thought of what might have been the consequences of his rash purpose.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, Abigail cautions and at the same time, counsels David to “consider his future reign and the citizens of that administration, who would be

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<sup>96</sup> Levenson, Jon D. "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History.", 19

<sup>97</sup> White, Ellen Gould Harmon. *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets As Illustrated in the Lives of Holy Men of Old*. Lanham, MD: Dancing Unicorn Books, 2016.667 <<http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=4790683>>.

motivated either by fear of reprisal or true loyalty.”<sup>98</sup> David must rule not by brute force but by patience and divine guidance. He must inspire loyalty and not bully his followers into submission.

Through her speech, Abigail saves David from shedding blood, and also prevents the immediate death of her husband. Abigail turns a potentially fatal situation around and makes it a source of blessing for David. While David is determined to exert vengeance on his own, and only brings God into the scene as a witness to the disaster he is about to inflict, Abigail places God at the center of the entire narrative and David’s future. David thinks that this conflict is simply between him and Nabal, but Abigail makes him see that it is more than that; it is between God and David’s enemies. She states very clearly that the battles David will fight should be God’s battles and not his. David must not usurp God’s role. It is only in this way that God can take care of his enemies for him (1 Sam 25:28). Abigail helped David learn the great leadership skill of restraint. This leadership skill will be utilized by David when confronted with the second opportunity to kill Saul:

Then Abishai said to David, “Today God has delivered your enemy into your hand; now therefore, please let me strike him with the spear to the ground with one stroke, and I will not strike him the second time.” But David said to Abishai, “Do not destroy him, for who can stretch out his hand against the Lord’s anointed and be without guilt?” David also said, “As the Lord lives, surely the Lord will strike him, or his day will come that he dies, or he will go down into battle and perish. “The Lord forbid that I should stretch out my hand against the LORD’S anointed; but now please take the spear that is at his head and the jug of water, and let us go” (1 Sam 26:6-11).

David’s response to Abishai is evocative of Abigail’s early advice to him (1 Sam 25:29-31).

Abigail’s wisdom is also apparent in her last words to David: “And when the Lord has prospered my lord, remember your maid.” (1 Sam 25:31). Similar to the stories of Joseph in Egypt who after interpreting the dream of Pharaoh’s cupbearer asks him to remember him when he is restored to his service (Gen 40:14-15), and Rahab who strikes a deal with the Israelite spies after saving them from harm’s way, Abigail uses the opportunity of her favor to David to make a request. No doubt, Abigail was a smart deal maker. She asks David to

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<sup>98</sup> Ken Mulzac. “The role of Abigail in 1 Samuel 2.5”, 50.

remember her when he becomes the מֶלֶךְ “Ruler”.

The question raised by some scholars is whether Abigail is a God-sent messenger to David who tries to protect him from bloodshed or an opportunist who takes advantage of the situation at hand to attach herself to a rising power? While the latter may be a plausible suggestion, the fact is that Abigail does not initiate her encounter with David. Her meeting with David is a response to a bad situation created by her husband.

### **Abigail and Her Prophetic Message to David**

Although the Old Testament does not explicitly call her a prophetess, Abigail is prophetic in many ways. Put her speech into the mouth of Nathan or Samuel, and without any doubt, it fits into their prophetic messages:

For the Lord will grant my lord an enduring house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord, and no wrong is ever found in you. And if anyone sets out to pursue you and seek your life, the life of my lord will be bound up in the bundle of life in the care of the Lord; but He will fling away the lives of your enemies as from the hollow of a sling. And when the Lord has accomplished for my lord all the good He has promised you, and has appointed you ruler (*nāgîd*) of Israel, do not let this be a cause of stumbling and of faltering courage to my Lord that you have shed blood needlessly and that my lord sought redress with his own hands (1 Sam 25:28-30).

Abigail is the first person to publicly declare that David has been chosen as *nâgîd ‘al yisrâ’ ĕl*, "ruler over Israel."<sup>99</sup> She assures David that the Lord will certainly make of him a sure house (1 Sam 25:28). This follows the prophetic messages of Jonathan (1 Sam 23:16-17) and Saul in the midst of crises (1 Sam 24:20), and also anticipates the promise made to David by the prophet Nathan concerning his dynasty that would be established by the Lord and will last forever (2 Sam 7:17). In some way, this could be an intentional casting of Abigail as a prophetess by the author of First Samuel.

Also, Abigail acts as a prophetic figure who speaks for God and wisely counsels David to right conduct. She literally changes David's direction. She challenges David to consider his God-given destiny and pardon Nabal's foolishness. She is confident that the Lord will bring about the downfall of David's enemies which proximately includes Nabal,

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<sup>99</sup> Levenson, Jon D "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History", 20

and remotely, Saul. Predictably, her husband, Nabal, who had become David's enemy, dies ten days after (1 Sam 25:38) while Saul kills himself in the battle with the Philistines (1 Samuel 31:1-6).

Undoubtedly, Abigail is a messenger from God, a kind of savior to David. Judith E. McKinlay suggests that a reading of the story of Abigail,

With ears attuned to canonical partners such as Genesis 2-3 and the Proverbs poems, may allow an interpretation of Abigail as another female agent of God, another Eve, another Wisdom figure in human form, taking David's reply in vv. 32-33 as supporting such a suggestion. At the same time the incident hints at what David is capable of doing if he chooses not to eat of Wisdom's fruit.<sup>100</sup>

The impact of her prophetic utterances is seen in David's response. David is moved by her words and repents of the oath he had made to wipe away the family of Nabal. Although, David had already spared the life of Saul and had given a credible reason for doing this, he is unable to decipher the right cause of action in the case of Nabal. Abigail provides him the direction that he needs and saves him from himself. In 25:30, she reiterates her previous prophetic announcement, but this time with great certainty that God will make David "ruler" (*nāgîd*) over Israel. Here, she adds that this was going to come about without any blood guilt. David must not defile himself with murder.

David himself acknowledges the significant role Abigail plays in his future rule. He blesses God for using her to prevent him from bloodshed (25:33). Megan McKenna aptly captures this when she observes that "Abigail is sent by God, and so, she is a prophetess, changing history and interjecting into the bloody history of Israel a moment of peacemaking, of nonviolence."<sup>101</sup>

### **Abigail's Pivotal Role in David's Rule**

David's marriage to Abigail bolsters his social status and provides him the political link to the heartland of Judah. Through this marriage, David "the fugitive" gains

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<sup>100</sup> McKinlay, Judith E. "To eat or not to eat: where is wisdom in this choice?." *Semeia* 86, (1999): 82 ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed May 2, 2017).

<sup>101</sup> MacKenna, Megan. *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible*. (Manila: St Paul's Philippines, 1997), 201.

prominence, legitimacy and acceptance in Judah.<sup>102</sup> His marriage to Abigail is the pivotal move in his ascent to kingship at Hebron (2 Sam 2:4).<sup>103</sup> It may not be completely ruled out that David strategically picked a quarrel with Nabal with this political move in mind.

Even though the narrative does not explicitly state that Nabal is a king except in reference to his feasting like a king, there is no doubt that Nabal is a prominent Calebite. Despite his churlish character, Nabal would have been at the “pinnacle of social status.”<sup>104</sup> To have possessed about three thousand sheep and a thousand goats (1 Sam 25:2) obviously indicates that Nabal is an important and powerful figure in the Calebite clan. David, through his marriage to Abigail inherits whatever position Nabal occupied. Abigail herself would have occupied the same social status. That Abigail rides on a donkey to meet David without consulting her husband could mean that she had a donkey, probably, the most expensive and affluent means of transportation at the time, indicative of her high socio-economic status.

Therefore, “behind the literary presentation of Abigail lies the socio-political reality of her marriage to David. David’s marriage to Nabal’s widow was useful in bringing him the needed support from the south.”<sup>105</sup> Kyle McCarter adds that David’s marriage to Abigail, the widow of a rich Calebite, provides an important link to the Calebite clan of Judah which controls Hebron, and prepares the reader for David’s anointing in Hebron, the capital of the Calebite territory.<sup>106</sup> Through his marriage to Abigail, David a non-Calebite gains acceptance and assumes kingship at the capital of the Calebite patrimony, Hebron, without resistance from the people (2 Sam 2:1-4).<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> We must point out here that scholars today are still battling with the question of the relationship between Judah as a geographical region and as a political entity at this time period. Mahri Leonard-Fleckman’s “The House of David: Between Political Formation and Literary Revision” treats this discussion very extensively. This work will focus primarily on the biblical narrative of Judah as a geographical region.

<sup>103</sup> Levenson, Jon D “1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History, 25

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>105</sup> Linda S. Schearing, “Abigail (Person)” in David Noel Freedman (Ed in chief): *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol 1, (London: Doubleday, 1992), 16.

<sup>106</sup> McCarter, Kyle *1 Samuel*, AB. (Garden City, IVY: Doubleday, 1980), 400-402

<sup>107</sup> Levenson, Jon D “1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History, 25



It was not unusual in Israel's early history to use marriage as a tool for gaining socio-political prominence. Matitiah Tsevat observes that, "The early history of the Israelite kingdom affords several examples of the fact that the marriage of a former king's wife bestows legitimacy on an aspirant who otherwise has no sufficient claim to the throne."<sup>108</sup> He goes on to give two examples within David's immediate family: Absalom, on Ahitophel's advice, has intercourse with David's concubines as part of his effort to wrest the throne from his father (2 Sam 16:20-23), and Adonijah asks for the hand of Abishag, David's last mistress (1 Kings 2:13-25), to which Solomon, with characteristic discernment, replies: "You might as well ask for the kingdom!" (v 22).<sup>109</sup> We also have the story of Abner who probably takes one of Saul's concubines, Rizpah as a way of solidifying his opposition to Ish-Bosheth, the son of Saul (2 Sam 3:6ff). These examples show that marriage was an important factor in gaining legitimacy within a tribe. Even though David is chosen by God to succeed Saul, Abigail becomes a necessary part of the realization of this divine plan.

Abigail is indeed wise and prophetic. She is able to calm the feud between her husband and David the future king of Israel. She is not afraid to intercept a furious David with his four hundred armed men, heading for murderous violence. She is clearly a woman of great courage who is able to match David's assertiveness with foresight and persuasive skills through which she is able to calm the wounded and angry David. She is also convinced about God's design for David, and how David's rash action can thwart that. Her words convey a strong message to David, who takes them seriously. David himself sees her timely intervention as divinely inspired. To a very large extent, Abigail was instrumental in David's success in ascending the throne. Although we can only speculate on what the situation would have been supposing David carried out his plans of killing Nabal and his household, it is very likely that apart from causing David considerable grief for spilling innocent blood, the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

Calebites would not have taken such unilateral murderous action lightly, and his acceptance at Hebron jeopardized.

David recognizes the potential of Abigail and immediately makes her his wife after the demise of Nabal. Although, no express or direct contribution of Abigail is mentioned during David's reign as king, it is probable that David found a counselor in Abigail who must have helped him in formulating and implementing some of his crucial decisions as king. Of all the wives of David, we can posit that Abigail remains very influential. She has the greatest positive influence on him. She was like an angel sent by God to counsel David and bring him to the throne. Deen Edith points out that "from his first meeting with her, King David's life seems to have taken on a higher meaning and a stronger purpose. He is no longer a fugitive and outlaw but destined to become the great king of Judah and of all Israel."<sup>110</sup>

Abigail taught David a valuable lesson in leadership, thus equipping him with tools for his rule. First, she helped David learn the value of patience with the enemy and those who disagreed with him. She also inculcated in him the need to put his trust in God rather than seek revenge. David's intent to punish Nabal for his disrespect is tantamount to attempting to be the one in charge of his destiny. However Abigail knows that such attitude would lead to utter failure. It is God who is the giver and guarantor of destiny and David can only succeed if he aligns himself with God, recognizing that he is fighting God's battle and not his own battle.

Before the 1 Samuel 25 narrative, the David that readers know is the young heroic victim who had suffered numerous murderous attempts from Saul and have been driven into exile (1 Sam 19:1-23). But the David that we encounter in 1 Sam 25 is one that is ready to kill for revenge. Suddenly, the "appealing young man of immaculate motivation and heroic courage"<sup>111</sup> becomes a bloodthirsty avenger. Swiftly, his ambition and capacity for anger

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<sup>110</sup> Deen, Edith. *All of the Women of the Bible*. (New York: Harper, 1955), 101

<sup>111</sup> Levenson, Jon D "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History, 23

reaches a dangerous level and only “the rhetorical genius of Abigail saves him from bloodying his hands”.<sup>112</sup>

Unfortunately, this propensity toward evil which begins in the Nabal episode will resurface once he becomes the king David. Not only does he commit adultery with Bathsheba, but he plots and executes the death of Uriah, the Hittite (2: Sam 11:1-27). The downfall which Abigail feared has been realized. The prophet, Nathan, did not mince words in addressing these evils:

This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own’ (2 Sam 11:7-10 NIV)

The David-Bathsheba story highlights the unique character of Abigail. David’s capacity for evil which is stopped by Abigail is unstoppable by Bathsheba. Abigail by both action and words of wisdom restrained him from his intent for revenge and inspired great confidence in David by assuring him that God was on his side if he refrained from bloodshed. But whether David would keep to this valuable lesson was a matter of time. She appears only two more times in the narrative: in 2 Samuel 2:3 where she is named among the two wives who settle with David at Hebron and in 2 Samuel 3:3 in reference to her son Chileab. Afterwards, she disappears from the entire scene after making herself available for God’s salvific plan for Israel through David.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

The women of the Old Testament were not merely ancillary to the men. From the beginning, in Genesis, the Old Testament eloquently attests to the equality and shared responsibility between man and woman. This equality is an ontological one which derives from their being created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26) and is shown in their joint authority over creation. In all the stories of women in the Old Testament reflected in this work, we notice how the women acted with autonomy. The matriarchs - Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel- all carried out very unique roles in Israel. The Midwives, Moses' mother, Pharaoh's daughter and the wife of Moses, Zipporah also played very decisive and independent roles in the exodus event. In Rahab, Deborah and Ruth we see an even more decisive and autonomous status of women in salvation history. This decisiveness and autonomy reaches its peak in Hannah and Abigail who take bold steps in influencing the story of Israel very positively. No doubt, their shared authority over creation with men is evident in their respective roles.

While not denying the fact that the Old Testament can rightly be viewed as a product of predominantly male authors and features a galaxy of male actors, it is also true that from cover to cover, the Old Testament is replete with narratives that clearly support the view that in very many ways, God directly used women to bring about his divine plan. This is true not just in the time of the patriarchs with matriarchs such as Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel, but also in the era of the Judges with Deborah, the most visible leader of her time. The period preceding Israel's monarchy and the early period of the monarchy featured important women like Hannah, who would become a source of hope to a declining nation, and the wise Abigail who played a very prominent role in the rise of David.

The examples of these women and their roles in salvation history demonstrate the pivotal position women occupy in the Old Testament. Their lives bear testimony against the

view held by some scholars that in the Old Testament world, women were “denied autonomous public status and confined to domestic service roles, as well as marginalized and denigrated in the religious cult.”<sup>113</sup> Both Hannah and Abigail in their narratives were obviously not confined to domestic roles. They both played a crucial role in Israel’s early monarchy and as such, became great instruments of God. While as we have examined there are different traditions about the monarchy in Israel, I do believe that the monarchy was indeed a necessary gateway to God’s realization of his salvific plan. This culminated in the coming of the Messiah, born from the house of David (2 Samuel 7:12; 1 Chronicles 7:11-14, Isaiah 9:5-6; 11:1-3; Jeremiah 33:14-15). Consequently, to the extent that Hannah and Abigail played key roles in the early monarchical period, they are clearly agents of salvation in the Old Testament.

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<sup>113</sup> Ruether, Rosemary Radford: *Feminism And Patriarchal Religion: Principles Of Ideological Critique Of The Bible*, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary Evanston IL 60201, USA, 56

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